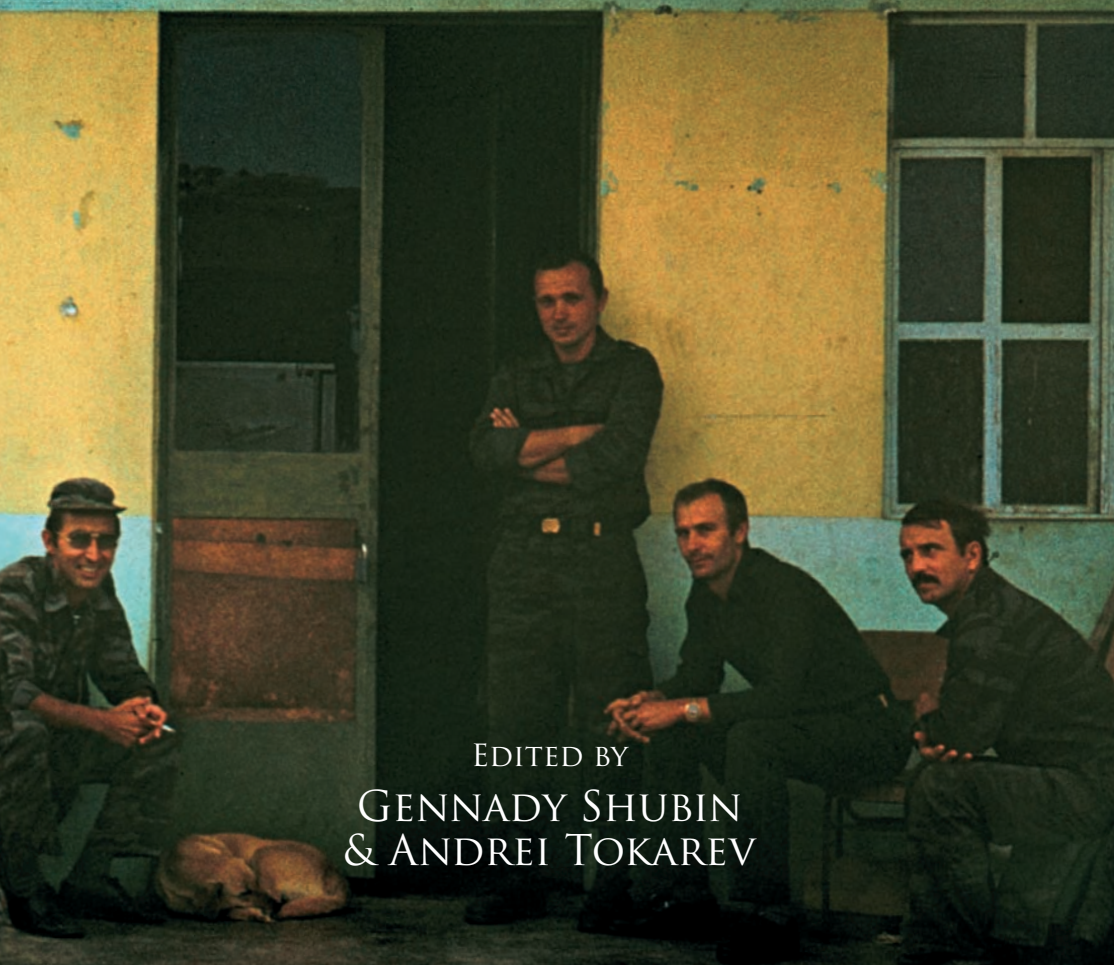


BUSH THE ROAD TO CUITO CUANAVALE WAR



SOVIET SOLDIERS' ACCOUNTS
OF THE ANGOLAN WAR



EDITED BY
GENNADY SHUBIN
& ANDREI TOKAREV

Bush War

The Road to Cuito Cuanavale

Soviet Soldiers' Accounts of the Angolan War

Edited by

Gennady Shubin
and Andrei Tokarev



The publishers would like to thank Tienie du Plessis for his invaluable help in preparing and facilitating the South African edition of this book.



First published in Russian in Moscow 2007, 2008

This English edition first published by Jacana Media (Pty) Ltd in 2011

10 Orange Street
Sunnyside
Auckland Park 2092
South Africa
+2711 628 3200
www.jacana.co.za

© 2007 Gennady Shubin and Andrei Tokarev (compilation)

© 2011 Tamara Reilly and Peter Sidorov (translation)

The editors are grateful to Mrs Tatyana Zubkova and Mrs Luydmila Vasilyk for the translation of some additional material in this edition.

All rights reserved

ISBN 978-1-4314-0185-7
eISBN 978-1-4314-0276-2

Cover photo: Igor Zhdarkin

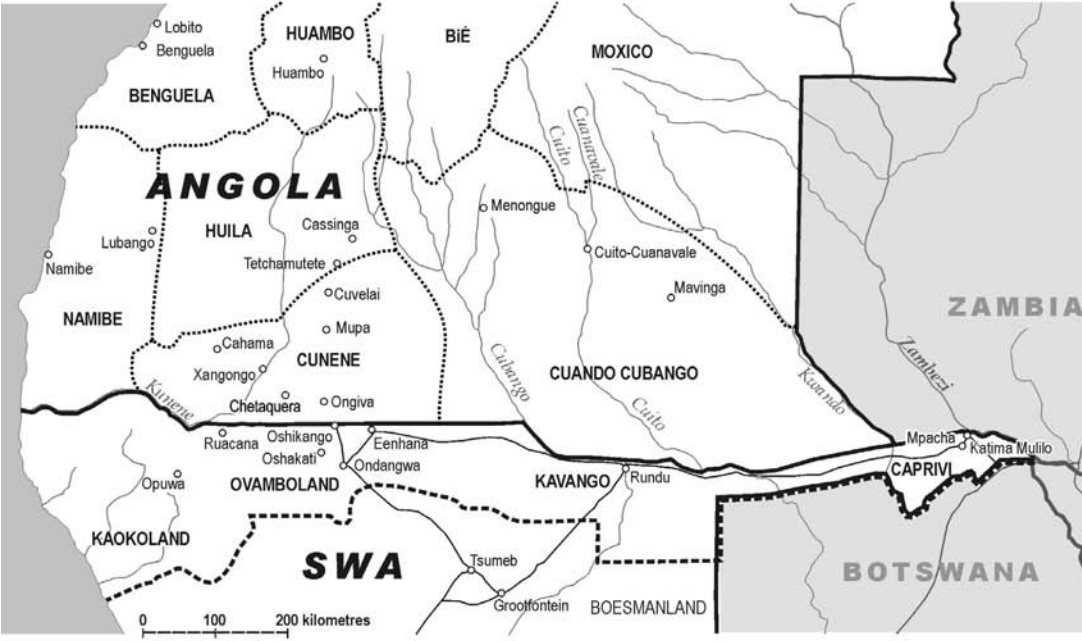
Set in Minion 10.5/14pt

Printed and bound by Ultra Litho (Pty) Limited, Johannesburg
Job No. 001543

See a complete list of Jacana titles at www.jacana.co.za

Contents

Introduction to the Russian edition	7
Introduction to the South African edition	9
1. WE WERE THE FIRST INTO SOUTHERN ANGOLA	
<i>Vladimir Anatoliyevich Varganov.....</i>	<i>11</i>
2. SECURING THE AIRSPACE	
<i>Vladimir Vasilievich Kostrachenkov.....</i>	<i>17</i>
3. THE TIDE TURNS	
<i>Vyacheslav Aleksandrovich Mityaev.....</i>	<i>21</i>
4. CUITO CUANAVAL: NOTES FROM THE TRENCHES	
<i>Igor Anatoliyevich Zhdarkin.....</i>	<i>34</i>
5. IGOR ZHDARKIN LOOKS BACK	94
6. RECOLLECTIONS OF GUNS, TANKS AND BOMBS	
<i>Vyacheslav Anatoliyevich Barabulya.....</i>	<i>166</i>
7. MEMORIES OF WAR IN ANGOLA	
<i>Anatoliy Eduardovich Alekseevsky</i>	<i>171</i>
8. LIFE ON THE SAVANNAH	
<i>Vladimir Anatoliyevich Korolkov</i>	<i>182</i>
Appendix 1: Gauging the Losses and the Outcome	189
Appendix 2: List of Major Weaponry.....	192
Endnotes	196



Introduction to the Russian Edition

Dr Gennady Shubin

THIS COLLECTION OF MEMOIRS first saw the light as two separate publications in Russian that were also translated into English. It formed part of the series titled *Oral History of Forgotten Wars*. The collection was put together in Moscow by Dr Gennady Shubin and Col. Dr Andrei Tokarev from the audio recordings of their conversations with retired veterans. It contains little-known information (even to professional military historians) about battles in Angola, where the interviewed officers were direct participants. The clashes sharply changed the geopolitical situation of at least three African states: Angola, Namibia and South Africa.

Apart from the first two contributions by Colonels Varganov and Kostrachenkov, this book mainly concerns the events in the south of Angola during 1987–1988, when units of the SADF together with combat forces of UNITA attempted to take the town of Cuito Cuanavale and to dislodge the units of the Angolan army (FAPLA) stationed there. FAPLA forces at Cuito Cuanavale included Soviet military advisers and specialists as well as Cuban combatants.

After the military defeats of March–June 1988, South Africa was forced to make concessions. An agreement was signed which provided for the withdrawal of South African forces from Angola and democratic elections in Namibia (leading to independence) in return for the gradual withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola.

Many academic and journalistic studies, not to mention articles in the media dealing with the Angolan civil war and the events during 1987–1988, are, at best, full of inaccuracies, to put it mildly. Perhaps these recollections will fill certain gaps in our knowledge.

Introduction to the South African Edition

Tienie du Plessis

THE SOUTH AFRICAN DEFENCE FORCE first became involved in the Angolan conflict towards the end of 1975. When, on 22 December 1988, South Africa, Cuba and Angola signed an agreement in New York to end the war, close on half a million South African conscripts had completed their military service. Not all of them had served on 'the Border' but those who took part in this protracted conflict (especially towards the end at Cuito Cuanavale) knew that this war was on the brink of spiralling into a very big confrontation. Back home after 1988, most of them would have agreed with negotiation before escalation.

After years of silence, a mass of local publications on the war has reached our bookshelves. South African conscripts and Citizen Force members are starting to recount their own memories in the hope of making sense of their experiences. Presented largely as 'history from below', these memoirs rarely indicate a political or ideological perspective and are often (but by no means exclusively) anti-heroic and subversive. Some of them present a belated wish that the war was somehow not a wasted venture. They never talk about that 'great victory' but they do tell the story of guns and bombs and destruction. And how it felt to carry a heavy load.

Few of them are familiar with how those on the other side experienced the same war.

This South African edition of the memoirs of Soviet participants in the Angolan war will go a long way to complete the picture. In these pages South African veterans will find that combatants from the Soviet Union recall a similar story of bombs and guns. They will realise that the life of a soldier in war is much the same the world over and that despite past

ideological differences they were (in a way) closer to their old enemies than they might have thought possible. And today they can reflect together on that heavy load they shared.

Local commentators and researchers will find in these pages contradictions, new insights and much to think about. Those who still seek victories will not necessarily be swayed by these recollections but they will hopefully be able to add a footnote, recognising the trials and tribulations forced on the ordinary foot soldier by the politicians and ideologues.

We Were the First into Southern Angola



Vladimir Anatoliyevich Varganov

From 1976 to 1978, Vladimir Anatoliyevich Varganov served in Angola as adviser to the district political commissar of the 5th military district in Lubango, southern Angola. On his return from Angola he became an instructor for the senior officers' courses, known as Vystrel ('The Shot'), in the town of Solnechnogorsk in the

Moscow region. He was appointed head of the unit of the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and of party-political work. Col. Varganov is a recipient of the order 'For Service to the Motherland in the Armed Forces – third class'.

ON 16 OCTOBER 1976 we flew into Luanda via Cairo, Khartoum, Bangui, and Brazzaville. In Luanda, we were met at the gangway of the plane. We were then taken by bus to our military mission. Our passports were taken away and we were given Cuban uniforms without any badges of rank. Then there was a general briefing. Other groups arrived at the same time. Shortly afterwards, we were allocated to various districts.

These were the officers assigned to the 5th military district in southern Angola: Col. P.T. Oganessian, adviser to the district commander; Lt.-Col. V.A. Varganov, adviser to the district political commissar; Lt.-Col. I.G.

Makhno, adviser to the chief of intelligence; Lt.-Col. V.N. Gorev, adviser to the chief communication officer; Lt.-Col. I.V. Gubin, adviser to the artillery commander; and Lt.-Col. N.N. Bondarenko, adviser to the anti-aircraft defence commander.

All these groups shared two translators: S.A. Siniakov, a student from the Military Institute, and I.G. Salnikov from the reserve, who specialised in Spanish. In this way we began our work. Gradually the group was joined by other advisers as they arrived in Angola. In 1978, at the end of our second year in the district, there were 18 advisers in all.

We arrived in Lubango on 26 October 1976 and were assigned to a six-storey house that had been recently built and equipped with every comfort – even with a lift. It was unoccupied. The Cubans helped us to settle in and brought us beds, mattresses, refrigerators, gas stoves, tables and chairs, sufficient to meet all our needs.

Lubango was the location of the Cuban headquarters, along with several of their military detachments. The Cuban commander was Brig.-Gen. Ferreira and Maj. Fernando was his chief of staff. Fernando had graduated from the M.V. Frunze Academy in the USSR and was fluent in Russian. Between us and the Cubans there developed the warmest working relationship. We often spent time together, conducted joint functions, and helped each other in training the Angolans.

The most important task before us was to provide all the personnel needed for the military district command and the units subordinate to it, and to instruct the units in their duties. Our task was not simple. There was a structure of sorts but there were no personnel – in the first instance, no officers. The situation improved a little after the first officers graduated from the command school in Huambo and the politico-military school in Luanda. There were difficulties with the rank and file as well: the majority were illiterate and couldn't speak Portuguese.

Then 1977 was declared the National Year of War Against Illiteracy in Angola. Schools were established in each military company. Although they lacked notebooks, pens and textbooks, the students applied themselves with enthusiasm and at times even used sticks to write with in the sand. Each person who was already literate was given the task to teach one or

two of his fellows how to read and write.

Although we gave honest reports of the true state of affairs every month to the chief military adviser, at times we received unrealistic instructions. For example, we were ordered to carry out a tactical exercise, but at the time there was no one to carry it out with! The Cubans calmed us down whenever we complained that our work seemed to have no effect. “We used to be the same,” Maj. Fernando assured us. “Whenever we caught sight of our [Soviet] military adviser, we would try to slip away to avoid receiving a new instruction. We understood why we did this – and the Angolans will also understand ...”

Our task became more difficult after the coup attempt on 27 May 1977 – a result of a factional struggle within the Politburo of the MPLA (the People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola – Labour Party). The political opposition was led by Nito Alves, whose views were shared by some of the military in FAPLA, the People’s Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola. But we didn’t know what the disagreement was about. It was only after the defeat of the opposition that we came to learn about the factionalism of Alves and his supporters. A number of individuals were arrested in our military district, including Santos (the political commissar whose adviser I had been), a member of the Central Committee and of the Revolutionary Council, the commander of the anti-aircraft defence, and nine others whom we knew personally. Probably there were many others that we didn’t know, including civilians. The district commander, Maj. Ivadi, evaded all questions about the issue and so their fate was unknown to us. From unofficial sources, we heard that many of them were executed on the edge of the Tunda-Vale ravine, which is more than 400 metres deep.

I retain a strong impression of our meeting with Fidel Castro in 1977 during his visit to Angola. One of the trips he made was to Lubango. About 3000 people, many brought from other towns in the province, gathered on the square in front of the provincial commissariat. Cuban soldiers guarded the meeting. A guard of honour, which had arrived from Luanda the day before, was deployed at the airport. Soldiers with machine guns were placed on the roofs overlooking the route Castro was to take. But he actually arrived from another direction – from Moçâmedes (now

Namibe). His motorcade of 12 yellow Mercedes-Benzes had to cross more than 200 kilometres of desert. At a park at the entrance to the city they were met by provincial leaders, Cuban military commanders and Cuban advisers (who worked in trade unions, and youth and women's organisations). I was also invited.

When the motorcade stopped, his bodyguards jumped out onto the road while the cars were still moving, and Fidel climbed out of his car in high spirits. The provincial commissar introduced each of the dignitaries to him (about 20 people altogether). Fidel shook hands with each of them, exchanged a few words with the Cubans, and then made ready to mix with the local people. At the rally he had a warm reception and spoke for about two hours. Every one of his statements and questions elicited an immediate and thunderous reaction from the audience. Simply writing about this event doesn't do it justice: you actually had to see and hear it.

That evening Fidel met with the staff of the Cuban contingent. A group of soldiers and officers about 200 to 250 strong was drawn up in front of an improvised rostrum. On the rostrum, as usual, were the regimental commanders and guests. Fidel stood in front of the company and chatted with ease. The soldiers smoked and asked questions, which he then answered. This was a fatherly discussion without any pretensions. Then it began to drizzle and an umbrella was brought out, but Fidel refused it. The meeting lasted between 35 and 40 minutes. Finally, Castro thanked everybody for their work. A reception followed at the residence of the provincial commissar, with beer, Havana Club rum and toasts. During the night, Fidel flew back to Luanda.

In 1977 the new chief military adviser, Lt.-Gen. V.V. Shakhnovich, arrived from the USSR. Until then, he had been the commander of the army in Yerevan, and also the chief military adviser in Somali from 1969 to 1971. He was an experienced and respected general. He visited every military district and investigated the local situation. On 8 December 1977, he visited our district and made several recommendations for changing what we were doing.

He suggested that our main task should be organising and training the district military staff officers and not training ordinary soldiers.

He recommended that instead of company tactical exercises, we focus on individual training and rifle practice with the district command. The adviser for artillery, Yuri Gubin, prepared an exercise. The result was a surprise – none of the Angolans could hit the target. The district commander, Maj. Ivadi, who'd taken part in two wars, was amazed. At first (as always), the weapons were blamed. But when Yuri Gubin, using the same AK-47 sub-machine-guns and from a standing position, literally tore the targets to pieces with short bursts of fire, the claim of weapons failure disappeared. The Angolans had been betrayed by their 'guerrilla' style, where they'd shoot but not to aim, as long as there was a lot of noise. This is why operations to destroy the bases of UNITA (the National Union for the Total Liberation of Angola) often ended prematurely – and frequently without result – when the attackers ran out of ammunition and provisions.

In order not to draw the army away from its planned combat training, schools for fighting against banditry were created in each district. This immediately improved the struggle against UNITA. One such school was set up in our district.

At the end of 1977 military advisers began to arrive in the brigades. This enabled us to concentrate on our work with the district military headquarters as well as with units subordinate to the district command.

On 4 May 1978, the South African Air Force bombed Cassinga, the main base of SWAPO (the South West Africa People's Organisation) in southern Angola,¹ at 06:30 just as troops were gathering in formation for the raising of the flag. The bombing was followed by parachute landings from three Hercules military transport planes. The paratroopers completed the massacre of the peaceful inhabitants of the camp and the units of PLAN (People's Liberation Army of Namibia) that protected it. More than 1000² people were killed.

A group of Cubans trying to provide aid, who had advanced from the district of Techamutete, was attacked by the South African Air Force on the outskirts of Cassinga. The Cubans sustained heavy losses with 16 killed, 71 wounded, and three tanks, one BRDM-2 armoured car, one BTR-60PB armoured personnel carrier and seven motor vehicles destroyed. The

South African paratroopers were lifted out by 16 helicopters. Their dead and wounded as well as prisoners were taken away. Abandoned parachutes (more than 20) revealed canopies that had been shot through, testifying to the resistance offered by the PLAN units.

On the same day, several minor bases of SWAPO were destroyed, and South African Mirage FIII fighter planes flew over Lubango and its army training centre. The Angolans at that time still lacked effective means of anti-aircraft defence.

In Lubango there was a UNITA underground organisation that directed its bands throughout the district. They distributed leaflets in which they appealed to the population to kill Soviets and Cubans, the 'new colonisers' of Angola. They also set up roadblocks, mined the highways and stole cattle from the peaceful inhabitants.

Two weeks before the end of his mission, the adviser to the chief of staff of the Huambo district, Nikolai (I forget his last name), was killed. He and his companions had set off for the artillery range. In front of them was a lorry, a Ural-375 carrying a number of soldiers, and they were following in a Volga GAZ-24 sedan. Nikolai was at the Volga's steering wheel, accompanied by a translator and a Cuban adviser. The country roads were very dusty. On their return journey, the Volga went ahead. A landmine exploded under the left front wheel and Nikolai was killed immediately. His companions suffered serious concussion.

My tour of duty was approaching its end. In Luanda, I met with my successor. We flew off in the same plane in which he and his group had arrived. The only thing I was able to do for him was to hand over my workbook.

Thirty years have passed. Many of my colleagues are no longer alive. Angola left an indelible impression on me: a rich, beautiful land in which there was everything – oil, diamonds, iron ore; rich soil from which every tropical and European crop grew and which could, according to specialists, feed all of Africa; and an industrious but poor people, struggling to overcome the legacy of colonialism.

Securing the Airspace



Vladimir Vasilievich Kostrachenkov

In 1976 Vladimir Vasilievich Kostrachenkov served as interpreter for a team of advisers in north Angola. In his second tour of duty in 1979–1981 he helped to establish the Pechora anti-aircraft system in the south of the country.

I SERVED IN LUANDA AS A MILITARY TRANSLATOR in 1976 and witnessed the power struggles of a number of movements – the FNLA (National Liberation Front of Angola), MPLA and UNITA. I was sent to Carmona in the north, where there was nothing of interest. At that time, military districts were being created and the first groups of advisers went there.

Six or seven of us had gone to one of the first districts to help organise the regular armed forces. I was the translator for the team of advisers involved. MPLA combat units were scattered all over the place. We had to move around and look at who was doing what, and what condition they were in. In every small town there was either a platoon or a company.

Whenever we went from Carmona to the district of Maquela de Zombo, 350 kilometres away, it was very dangerous. In 1976 the FNLA was really powerful and working aggressively in the area. Holden Roberto was its commander. As for UNITA, no one in the area had heard of it then.

The FNLA operated from Zaire (today the Democratic Republic of

the Congo) to the north. Attempts to seal the border between Angola and Zaire never worked because the FNLA fighters used dugout canoes and small, light boats to move in complete silence along the many tributaries of the Congo River. They would infiltrate 200 or even 300 kilometres into Angola. Because their fellow tribesmen were scattered all over the region, the struggle was doomed to be a long-drawn-out affair.

After I completed the course at our Military Institute of Foreign Languages, I returned to Angola in 1978–1981, again as an interpreter. Angola had begun secret negotiations with Zaire, trying to get them to close down all the FNLA's bases so as to stop their attacks. The deal on offer was that, if Zaire stopped supporting the FNLA, Angola would discontinue its support of the Katanga police.

T-55 tanks arrived while I was in Angola, and T-62 tanks came later on. We had 12 MiG-21 aircraft and some MiG-17s – first a batch of ten, but very soon they stopped using them. In fact, I don't know why they ever supplied them, they weren't even suitable for training purposes. The MiG-21s, on the other hand, lasted for several years. Already at the start of the 1980s or earlier, the more modern MiG-23s and SU-22 fighter bombers began to arrive.

They were supplied because it became clear that the Angolan army couldn't really conduct military activities without either normal air support or anti-aircraft defences – even though some sub-units had been put together and some cadres had begun to return to Angola after completing courses at Soviet military colleges. South African planes flew over southern Angola and were able to do whatever they wanted.

The anti-aircraft defence used the ZU-23-2 twin-barrelled auto-cannon as well as the 14.5-mm ZPU-4 machine guns. These were very effective weapons against both aircraft and ground troops. They barked fire with dreadful force. There were also the rockets – Strela-2 and Strela-2M – launched manually from the shoulder. They were good weapons with a range of up to 2500 metres, I think, with a minimum of 150 metres.

However, the South African warplanes always flew at an altitude of at least 3500 metres because the landscape was mountainous. And just at that time, four Mirages flew by at that very height, bombed everything

they wanted and disappeared. They flew over southern Angola towards Lubango, Moçâmedes, Usheba and Cuito Cuanavale in an assault group of FI and FIII Mirages, Impala attack aircraft and Buccaneer bombers.

Even though the Buccaneers were getting to be old aircraft, they cruised at 3500 to 4500 metres and dropped their bombs. And in this way they terrorised the whole of southern Angola with their terrible force. They hit the ANC camps as well as the SWAPO and FAPLA ones. Incredibly, these air raids did bomb purely civilian targets from time to time. Either they were incorrectly informed by military intelligence or they did this to teach the Angolans a lesson.

Up until then, the South Africans had been doing whatever they liked there – flying in, dropping bombs and flying out again. Each time, the minister of defence, the chief of general staff and the president would ask Gen. Shakhnovich or Gen. Inyuzov (as head of staff): “Well, how come once again they are doing exactly what they want? How come? We prepare anti-aircraft artillery and personnel, but they continue to fly around and bomb where they want. Where are the anti-aircraft defences of our brave FAPLA?”

The question arose about creating anti-aircraft defence ourselves. First of all it was decided to cover southern Angola, the 5th military district. A group of specialists from the Soviet Union arrived in 1981 to select suitable positions for the ground-to-air missiles. I at once set off with them for Lubango. The plan was to protect Lubango, home of the famous Bandeira Park, from South African air raids. This proved not at all an easy task. Three anti-aircraft divisions were needed, and were to protect one another. They formed a triangle so that two divisions could attack any aircraft flying in from anywhere. In this way the targets on the ground were protected and the two divisions were covering each other at the same time.

But in Lubango district it turned out that the summit of this triangle was limited by the range of fire, while the location of each division was limited by the mountains, which in turn hindered the launching of rockets – it’s not possible to launch a rocket at enemy aircraft flying very low. A division set on a mountain commands a good view and the enemy can be

seen from a great distance, but you can't fire at him when your rocket has to be set at a negative angle.

For the Pechora (S-125) system the altitude of the target hit was almost 20 000 metres. Given the planes South Africa had, this altitude was fine, but at low altitudes there were problems. With the mountainous terrain, the Pechora system could unfortunately not be put on a mountaintop for planes passing at less than 50 metres above the ground. No rockets could take them out. It was also difficult to block all approaches because it turned out that there was always some corridor available, some sort of narrow gully or depression that a plane could pass through.

We worked there for ten days. We visited the whole area around Lubango and specialists checked possible sites with theodolites. Most of them agreed there were five or six points that could allow anti-aircraft divisions to cover each other and what they were protecting, and shoot down the enemy's aircraft. But there were still two places where low-flying planes had to be shot at by anti-aircraft artillery or Strela-2 rockets, since the Pechora complex couldn't cover the gullies.

Near Lubango we found a suitable place where we later installed the Pechora and set the command centre and division positions to suit the topography. Then secretly at night a ship entered the port of Moçâmedes (now Namibe) bringing rockets and (still secretly) we hauled these rockets from the port through the Moçâmedes desert along a hairpin-bend road into Lubango and set them in place.

By that time, of course, all the engineering was completed, positions fitted, and so on. Once the whole thing had been assembled and installed by our military specialists, the Cubans took over the controls. And the South African intelligence knew nothing about it! I simply think that the South Africans malfunctioned at that time. They didn't know that our rocket complexes were sited there. And the Cubans shot down their planes.³

The Tide Turns



Vyacheslav Aleksandrovich Mityaev

From 1986 to 1989 Vyacheslav Aleksandrovich Mityaev served in Angola as adviser to Angolan military reconnaissance units. He was stationed in the 6th military district in Menongue and Cuito Cuanavale and saw action during the various offensives and counteroffensives that took place towards the end of the South African involvement

in the war. He was also part of the initial Soviet deployment in Afghanistan, 1979–1980. After retirement he settled in Moscow. Col. Mityaev is a recipient of the USSR orders of 'Red Star' and 'For Service to the Motherland – third class' and the Cuban medal 'To the Heroic Defenders of Cuito Cuanavale'.

I ARRIVED IN ANGOLA IN MARCH 1986. At the time our chief military adviser there was Lt.-Gen. Leonid Kuzmenko, formerly the deputy commander of the Russian airborne troops, the VDV, for combat training. He replaced Col.-Gen. Konstantin Yakovlevich Kurochkin.⁴

I was invited to Angola by Lt.-Gen. Kuzmenko. This was 1986. He came from Angola on leave and proposed that I come there as an adviser to the head of Angolan military reconnaissance. But then our 10th department of the general staff won and I was confirmed as an adviser to the head of reconnaissance of the 4th military district in Huambo. I was already a colonel then, deputy head of reconnaissance of airborne troops.

I flew in on an IL-62, a nonstop flight, and my first image was of the piles of tin cans on the streets. The part of Luanda which borders the ocean with its high-rise buildings was clean, but further away the outskirts were dirty. By no means a rosy impression of Africa – nothing like a colourful TV programme about African nature! And it was like a sauna, with the humidity and temperatures over 30 degrees Celsius. Everyone was soon dripping; very unpleasant. When you arrive in Angola you need time to get the gist of things – how to organise food and everyday life. The food is radically different, for a start.

I reported to the adviser to the head of military intelligence on the Angolan general staff. He was from strategic intelligence. That's one person you definitely didn't need to send there. You needed military reconnaissance personnel. Overall the selection of military advisers in Angola left a lot to be desired.

My proposals about what advisers we needed were completely at odds with the official idea. Afterwards they understood this and chief military advisers were invited from the VDV.⁵ In Angola, the army was organised into brigades (brigades are composed of battalions, three per brigade). Yet the war there had guerrilla aspects and the tactics of paratroopers are best suited to guerrilla warfare, whereas those in the ground forces, who were sent from cadre divisions,⁶ tried to apply linear tactics. This is totally unsuitable. You need manoeuvres, action on a separate axis, mainly using battalions. I could actually specify the kind of structure needed to Col. Vadim Andreevich Sagachko. He was grateful to me: "You are the first to bring me up to speed." Later on, he became adviser to the 10th brigade in Longo, where I hope he could use some of the ideas we'd discussed.

When I arrived in Luanda the chief military adviser, Gen. Kuzmenko, told me, "Vyacheslav Aleksandrovich, you have been assigned to Huambo. I am not going to insist but I would like you to be sent to the south, to the 6th military district. I would like to have my own representative there. I have one lieutenant-colonel but he's not really what I'm looking for." The fact was that I, as the deputy head of reconnaissance of the VDV, had had a lot of experience by that time, so I said: "If I must, I must."

"I am not insisting, of course," Gen. Kuzmenko went on, "but in

Huambo there's good accommodation, the town itself, the provisioning is good. One of the places in Angola where it's pleasant to serve ... Come back tomorrow, see what you think."

I replied: "What is there to think about, it's fine with me!"

Two days later I flew out on an IL-76. We were flying at an altitude of 10 000 metres, but then we quickly spiralled downwards dropping heat flares as we went (these flares are invaluable, as decoy heat spots released by aircraft in danger of being attacked by heat-seeking missiles). Below us flew an American-made C-130 Hercules. **I don't know who sent it, but it flew every day and brought in humanitarian-aid cargoes.** The C-130 is a good, very reliable plane. And so is our An-12. That's why there are many of them still flying in Africa – An-12s and C-130s – even though they've been written off.

As it turned out, instead of serving in Huambo I went instead to the 6th district in Menongue, in the Cuito Cuanavale area. **I got to know the road from Menongue to Longo and then to Cuito Cuanavale very well, from the many times I drove down it.**

As I flew into Menongue, the adviser to the district commander was about to leave. I introduced myself to him and then looked around the place – it was small, like a provincial town but more of a village really. The adviser and I drove to the staff office and I introduced myself to "Vietnam", the first district commander, who was a member of the MPLA central committee. (When he left, "Batista" became the next district commander. These are their aliases – they like them, they don't use their real names at all.) Then I met the head of the Angolan reconnaissance and went to have a look at their reconnaissance battalion. It was made up of companies armed with AKs and Kalashnikov machine guns (AK-47, AKM and RPK).

The reconnaissance men lived in a large dugout two metres deep. It had concrete walls, a light sloping roof and about a metre gap between the walls and the roof so it was always terribly windy. There was no glass in the windows so the light and air – and mosquitoes – all came in. There were no beds, everyone slept on the floor, on cardboard like the homeless, and they covered themselves with a light duvet. They would put their assault rifles underneath their heads.

They carried grenades around with them too. The grenades mainly weren't ours but there were some Soviet F-1s. (UNITA soldiers had our assault rifles and their hand grenades were small and round – American-made, I think.)

I began to work with the reconnaissance battalion, helping them to organise their training. I went there every day. Taught them how to set up ambushes, carry out raids, how to move about, how to sneak up on somebody, take out the watchmen, transport the prisoners. Night-vision sights for the assault rifles and machine guns were issued – one sight per squad. The instruments broke down quickly because of the severe climate and negligent treatment. The only things that held together well were Kalashnikov assault rifles and Kalashnikov machine guns. FAPLA used only those weapons. Once I went and asked a fighter: "Show me your weapon. When did you last clean it?" "We never clean them. They shoot fine as they are!" The guys just laughed. They never cleaned their guns, never greased them with oil.

Near Cuito Cuanavale were the Pechora, Kvadrat and Osa-AK air-defence missile systems, and there was an untarred airstrip nearby. A radio-radar reconnaissance company was deployed in the area surrounding the airfield.⁷ The town is located on the junction of the Cuito and Cuanavale rivers and is made up of smallholdings (*fazendas*) that were urban, not agricultural. The dwellings were decorated by the Portuguese, who came here on hunting trips. They would write "*Fazenda*" and the name of the smallholding on their maps. These neighbourhoods were full of cottages, well furnished. The Angolans had let them run down, the sewerage and the rest of it had collapsed. These neighbourhoods were set in very nice places.

Cuito Cuanavale itself, on a rise next to the river junction, is a colourful place. The rivers are clear, like distilled water. Of course we had to boil it as there were too many living organisms in it. We fished off boats using fishing rods and worms as bait. In the clear water you could see all the different fish – green, red, pink – of a similar size to fish in Russia but the colours are totally different. Also predator fish – tiger fish – with teeth like a saw the whole way. We ate the fish, made soup out of it. We celebrated

New Year (both 1987 and 1988) in Cuito. This is what we did: we'd clamber down into the Cuito River, the water was very warm. There weren't any crocodiles nearby; they were further upstream in small tributaries.⁸ Once we found the remains of an elephant and a pride of lions wandering around near there. You could see all kinds of animal life. Because of the war, however, there were very few of them left.

There were lots of fish in the river though. But the locals didn't fish much as there was hardly any male population around (they were all mobilised either for UNITA or for FAPLA). And the rest – the elderly, women, children – lived off the local garrison. Everyone went around wrapped in sheets of green cloth. The soldiers would give them something to eat. Along the river banks the locals had small plots of cultivated land but they didn't do much farming.

The FAPLA army was fed from local sources. From 1985 it was mainly tinned food from humanitarian aid. UNITA was better supplied than FAPLA. When reconnaissance men took them prisoner, these UNITA men had chocolate, pâtés, tinned ham and sausages, especially spicy, very salty canned meat. Everything in the cans was very salty so that it didn't spoil.

Then from May 1987 the preparation for the operation in Cuito Cuanavale started. The reconnaissance battalion was transferred to Cuito Cuanavale. Maybe you have heard that several of our petrol tankers were destroyed? Later I came from Cuito Cuanavale to get foodstuffs and saw the twisted wreckage.⁹ This happened in 1987, prior to the operation, I can't remember exactly whether it was May or June. **This column had arrived in Menongue and it was accompanied by the 5th Angolan brigade and another brigade (I've forgotten its number) on its way to Cuito.**

The column was made up of 23 large semi-trailer tankers, 18 of them with diesel and five with petrol. **About ten tankers were burnt out.** They were incinerated around midway on the road between Longo and Cuito Cuanavale (that route is only 190 km – about 100 km from Menongue to Longo and 90 from Longo to Cuito).

FAPLA losses were small. It was mainly the tanker drivers who had been killed. Those who managed to jump out of the cabins survived. The war effort had sustained significant damage though. Lots of fuel for

armoured vehicles and trucks was destroyed just as they were preparing for the upcoming operation (though the operation still took place).

It hadn't been an aerial attack, just a UNITA ambush. Our routine was that, as the brigade went down the road, the guards moved along on both sides and the vehicles followed them. And so when Angolan brigades moved out we were ready, situated halfway between Menongue and Longo, where the column stood. Our command post was in Menongue, on the airfield. The ops group kept radio contact with the column.

I can't remember how many tanks were in the column. The brigades escorted the petrol tankers on foot, without much armoured vehicle support, as the road went through the savannah. The surrounding area could be easily combed. **I must say that the Angolan commanders really missed the bus here.** Indeed ambushes are sometimes organised like this: the UNITA fighters see the cordon and go deep into the savannah; then, when the cordon has moved on, they move out and strike.

In this case several landmines exploded. This stopped the column, and then UNITA hit the tankers using RPG anti-tank grenade launchers. It's difficult to distinguish the UNITA men. They were all dressed the same, in FAPLA camouflage. And the weapons were the same – AK and RPK machine guns and RPG-7s. UNITA burnt out several tankers using RPG-7 anti-tank grenade launchers, and then they left having completed their mission. They were ordered to make one shot each and then get away. Some of them opened fire covering the others' retreat but then they left as well.

When the head of reconnaissance and I found out that an attack on the column had taken place we flew out in a Cuban Mi-8 helicopter. We went at low altitude – no more than 100 metres. As we passed Longo there was just black smoke all across the horizon, you couldn't see anything. As soon as we reached the edge of the smoke we saw there was gunfire on the ground.

The convoy had halted and a firefight was going on. Several tankers with diesel had burnt out. The tankers were large, on separate trailers, about 30 tonnes or so. The trucks were of various types. The smoke was terrible! We wanted to rise higher in the helicopter but the Cuban pilots

lacked the nerve, and we couldn't see much through the smoke. We flew about on the edge of the smoke for some time and returned to base. You can't see anything in the savannah anyway. We fought a lot in there but we never came face to face with the enemy, the terrain is enclosed by dense brush. Nobody goes into bayonet charges there – they can't see each other, only hear each other's fire. They usually return fire in the direction of the sound of fire. Offensives are conducted in the same way.

The Angolans hear gunfire and run. They aren't really brave soldiers. The Angolans were terrified of the South Africans. When we in the 16th, 21st and 47th brigades¹⁰ went on a three-month offensive from Cuito Cuanavale towards Jamba, many Angolans just ran away as soon as the South Africans advanced.

We always advanced during the dry season, which begins in May. We began the "Saluting October" offensive around July. Three Angolan brigades took part in the operation. We went on foot with BTR-60PB APCs (armoured personnel carriers) and small Brazilian Engesa trucks with supplies of food, ammunition and fuel. The tanks remained in their positions in front of Cuito. Then the brigades each went in a separate direction.

The offensive on Jamba, Savimbi's¹¹ capital, lasted three months. We didn't reach it. We went up to the Lomba River. Altogether there were several such operations, and they always finished at this river. The enemy wouldn't allow us to go any further. For three months we gradually moved forwards, with skirmishes, checking for minefields as well. Every time the Angolan troops reached the river, the South African army went into action straight away, especially the Buffalo battalion. The South African Air Force (SAAF) would begin its attacks – Mirage F1 fighter bombers and Impala attack aircraft. Pilotless reconnaissance planes were used as well. One of them that was reconnoitring the brigades' positions was found in the area around the bridge in Cuito Cuanavale.

The South Africans got involved when there was a direct threat to Savimbi's hideout. They wouldn't allow FAPLA beyond the Lomba River. The South Africans would counterattack using AML-60 and AML-90 APCs and Olifant tanks. I didn't go in with the leading groups. Substantial

firefights took place over there. One of our translators, Oleg Snitko, lost an arm. The Cubans evacuated him in a helicopter with a doctor in attendance but, sadly, he died. The Cubans didn't take part in this offensive. They remained in their positions near Cuito Cuanavale.

Sometime in October 1987 the South African counteroffensive began. The Angolans crossed the Lomba River but the South Africans launched a powerful attack and our Angolan forces were made to retreat. The South Africans didn't chase the Angolans for long. They didn't cross the Lomba River.¹²

I was there in Cuito Cuanavale throughout that period from around May 1986 till 1989. The command post of the Angolans we were advising was in Cuito. We had a small site there: a hut with a canopy, a sauna with eucalyptus branches and a small hiding place – a trench covered with the metal floor from an Engesa truck serving as a roof. South African artillery fired on us with 155-mm shells (G-5 and G-6 SP guns, with a range of 39 to 47 kilometres), whereas our artillery, BM-21s, multiple rocket launchers with a 20-km range, couldn't reach them.

While the brigades made their advance we were in the command post in Cuito Cuanavale. The South African artillery fired at us, of course mainly aiming for the airfield, which was their primary target. The whole of Cuito was blitzed. All the houses were battered by the rounds.

When the South Africans started to find their targets, the Angolans were the first to get out of the way of the artillery bombardment. They relocated their command post to a forest near Cuito and fitted out some dugouts there. Then the Cubans also left for the forest, while we continued to stay in Cuito. No one organised anything for us. All we had was our little hiding place.

I remember that once a shell hit the Angolan staff office next to our hut. Our hut was a light wooden structure,¹³ like all the houses in Cuito Cuanavale. The shrapnel sliced through the wall of the dining room where we were all resting. The troop service adviser, Col. Andrei Gorb, was sitting at the table writing a report. A fragment hit the fridge – I don't know how it managed to miss him.

Col. Gorb was killed a month later. As the artillery strike began, we

all dived into the hideout trench and started playing dominoes. He was sitting next to our sauna under the canopy, where we held our political classes and stored the sporting equipment – a small unfenced space. At the time we were taking turns, keeping watch along with the Angolan guards. Col. Gorb was meant to go out on watch to give orders. As we all hurried into the hideout, we yelled at him: “Let’s go!” He yelled back: “I must instruct the guards and will come in soon!” Then suddenly a Valkiri shell exploded nearby. It flew in through the roof of the canopy. We got out of the hideout straight away. A GAZ-66 truck stood just outside it. I looked underneath the truck, saw a man lying there and ran up to him. Col. Gorb looked perfectly fine but one of the balls¹⁴ had struck him in the throat, in the carotid artery. We carried him into the hut. The doctor immediately began working on him but he died in front of me. Then I closed his eyes.

Shells landed around our hut so many times. Once a shell landed when I was running into the hideout and a small, spent piece of shrapnel hit me in the leg – well, it was just a small scratch.

I remember the bombardments as if they were today.

Once we were driving from the area of our dugouts to the command post, still in Cuito Cuanavale. We were in an infantry fighting vehicle, the BMP-1, and entering the zone of the command post when all of a sudden a shell hit close by. The command platoon was to the right of me and 22 people were killed. But in my BMP-1 I just heard bits of shrapnel rattling against the armour.

I parked the BMP-1 and went to the command post while the artillery bombardment continued. In the car park an Engesa truck with an Angolan soldier inside stood next to the BMP-1. One shell hit the corner of the command post dugout but didn’t really damage anything. I finished my work, came outside – and the BMP-1 wasn’t there, the Angolan driver had driven off somewhere. Where I’d left the BMP-1 I saw a destroyed Engesa with the dead Angolan driver inside; his stomach mangled by the shrapnel. Had the driver-mechanic of the BMP-1 not driven off, the shell would have hit it and nothing would’ve saved him or the vehicle.

This was how things played out. Every day there was a lot of shelling. The South Africans watched when we drove out to the command post,

using visual and acoustic surveillance devices. We noted the pattern: when we left for the command post the shelling would begin. Our deputy commander for political affairs, Lt.-Col. Kuptsov, was wounded in the leg. My reconnaissance battalion was frequently shelled. Once a shell hit us and two men were killed. The South Africans pounded us using G-5 and G-6 guns for days on end. You had the double shell bursts. When the shells flew overhead you heard the first rumble and then the second as the shell hit the ground. When the two coincided, then you would be right on the bullseye. The awful noise would tell you it had exploded over your head or somewhere very close to you. So many shells, and every day!

When the command post moved to the forest the South Africans constantly bombarded the three remaining installations – the airfield, the radar reconnaissance company and the anti-aircraft defence squadron.

The 1987 offensive ended in November with the Angolans retreating, having suffered large losses. The rainy season begins then. All operations were carried out in the preceding six months when there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Then we left for the forest and built dugouts there; but the South Africans pounded us there as well.

The Cubans were located in Cuito for a while, commanded by Brig.-Gen. Ochoa.¹⁵ Initially they stayed on the western side of Cuito Cuanavale, on the other side of the Cuito River from us. They had defensive positions placed there. And since Cuito Cuanavale lies on a hill we could see all too clearly how they were being shelled. The Angolans occupied the front positions, while the Cuban T-55 tanks stayed in their defensive positions, buried turret-deep in the ground. The Cuban T-62 tanks – a battalion of them, about 30 tanks, no more – appeared later when the main action started. I have a film somewhere which shows that column of T-62s arriving. They were brought on trailers from the nearest port, I can't remember the date exactly, everything's got mixed up in my head because later in 1988 there was the offensive.

In early 1988 there was a tank battalion in Cuito – of 22 tanks. The Cubans didn't have any reserves in the rear and all the Cuban troops stood defending in front of Cuito Cuanavale. I can't say for sure how many Cubans there were with their T-54B and T-55 tanks.¹⁶ I remember

that when the tanks were crossing to our side of Cuito the bridge was bombed.¹⁷ Later it was reconstructed.

The South Africans never occupied Cuito Cuanavale. They brought in their troops and extra tanks and on 11 March, together with UNITA, started an offensive. They lost five Olifant tanks, an upgraded version of the English Centurion tank, in the minefields (they claimed they'd only lost four). They advanced, but they couldn't get through the Angolan–Cuban defence.

Commenting on this, Fidel Castro said: “The South African aviation could not operate because of the bad weather, but instead the South African tanks were in the air.” He mocked the South Africans, who conducted an offensive in March (still the rainy season) and couldn't win it, supposedly because of the bad weather which prevented their air force from operating.

When the South African tanks were put out of action by the mines,¹⁸ the Cubans took one of them and afterwards everyone was taking photographs of themselves against it. It's a massive thing that tank, very tall.

And yet the South Africans kept firing on us. Actions by small enemy groups and armed engagements continued. There were still firefights and bombardments with mortars. UNITA later used the South African Valkiri systems. The South Africans shelled us from far away and kept up the artillery bombardments from their 155-mm G-5 howitzers. The shelling only ceased sometime towards the end of 1988.

When an operation was completed all our advisers would be replaced. And then two weeks later we'd get a directive from the Angolan general staff to compile a report on the operation. “Vietnam” (already serving in the general staff) asked for one. Being a staff officer it wasn't a real problem for me. I was always informed about the situation. I wrote a hefty report and the operations officer, an Angolan captain, translated it into Portuguese. The report included the aim, intentions and progress of the operation; use of brigades and battalions; use of artillery; use of aviation; use of engineer troops. One chapter was dedicated to the actions of the enemy, on the other side.

For around two weeks we sat down with “Vietnam” compiling this

report.¹⁹ We taught the Angolans how to write reports. Then “Vietnam”, as the one responsible for the operation, delivered the report to the general staff. When he asked me when I was leaving Angola and I said I was going in a few months’ time, he proposed that I stay longer as they needed qualified advisers like me.

During the three years I served in Angola I returned home on leave only once. Three Soviet groups and three of the Angolan command groups were rotated in the 6th district while I was there. The district commanders and chiefs of staff were frequently changed as well. When new ones came, I was one of the people who brought them up to date. After a year of service I was already an old-timer, I knew the whole situation clearly as I worked with the maps and with reconnaissance.

We intercepted UNITA’s radio conversations in Portuguese and also received enemy reconnaissance information. My radio operators knew the UNITA working frequencies off by heart as they weren’t changed that often and we listened to them all the time. There were a lot of conversations between the different UNITA units, the enemy’s reconnaissance units and their battalions. They conducted open transmission on English-made Racal radio transmitters – and didn’t encrypt them. We had Racal transmitters as well. They were excellent, better than our Russian ones – compact and portable.

We were once visited by the head of the operational department of the Angolan general staff, Gen. “Ngongo”.²⁰ I was working with the head of the staff office, updating him (this was the fourth chief of staff in the district in my time there, an Angolan colonel). While I was explaining the current situation around Menongue and Cuito Cuanavale, Gen. Ngongo pointed at me and asked: “Who is this?” (all of them speak good Russian). The commander answered: “This is the adviser to the head of reconnaissance.” “Why is he with the chief of staff?” Ngongo asked. The commander replied: “He works with everybody here – with me, the operations officer, the chief of staff, the head of reconnaissance, everybody.”

Constantly, by which I mean every day, I went to exchange information with the Cubans. They had much better information than the Angolans. They sent out their own reconnaissance units. Perhaps their reconnaissance

units operated together with SWAPO in Namibia; SWAPO didn't operate with us as they were far away in the 4th district, to the south of Huambo.

At the end of 1988 and into 1989, the guerrilla war continued as before. UNITA shelled Menongue using 82-mm mortars. My wife could tell you about that. She came to visit me half a year after I started serving in Angola in 1986. Then, after I left, FAPLA carried out an operation to liberate Mavinga in 1990. Our military engineer, Lt.-Col. Nikolai Kalinin, went with the Angolan forces beyond the Lomba River. He would know about those operations.

Cuito Cuanavale

Notes from the Trenches



Igor Anatoliyevich Zhdarkin

From 1986 to 1988 Igor Anatoliyevich Zhdarkin served as an interpreter in Angola. After service missions in Mozambique (1990–1991) and Bangladesh (1995) he twice returned to Angola as liaison and coordinating officer with the Russian Air Force support unit belonging to the UN peacekeeping forces (UNAVEM-III and MONUA) in 1996 and 1998. Following a later military-academic career at the Military University (formerly the Red Banner Military Institute) and the Institute of Military History of the ministry of defence, he now works as interpreter and translator with various companies and organisations. Lt.-Col. Zhdarkin was awarded medals from the USSR 'For Meritorious Combat', from Cuba 'To the Heroic Defenders of Cuito Cuanavale', and from the UN 'In the Service of Peace' for three tours with the UN peacekeeping forces. He is fluent in Portuguese, English, Spanish, Bengali, Polish, Ukrainian and Byelorussian.

Igor Zhdarkin's combat diary, which appears below, was written in a thick school notebook. He also kept a notebook of secret radio telegrams. These invaluable sources of information would have perished if Zhdarkin had not

disobeyed orders and saved the record when the Soviet military advisers were trapped at the Ube River. Here is his account of that decision:

“When we were caught in the encirclement on the banks of the Ube River, we began to burn all documents which could attract the interest of the South Africans and UNITA. But, to be honest, I still held out the hope that we could escape and extricate ourselves somehow. I burnt tables of secret code, some circular instructions dealing with the organisation and conducting of service communication, as well as some other papers which Mikhailych [Lt.-Col. Artiomenko] had set aside for rapid destruction. As for the diary, Mikhailych said to me, “Sorry for you, but if something happens, my orders are to destroy it!” To be fair, he evidently also hoped for a better outcome and did not wish to see me forced to destroy the diary as he had often helped me in its writing (he had given me indispensable data, explained details dealing with materiel and weaponry, advised me on how best to represent this or the other event, and so on) even though it was prohibited to write any diaries during combat actions.

“But if the worst came to the worst, the notebook of secret radio telegrams was definitely supposed to be destroyed! Well, I hid the notebook, I didn’t burn it. When I moved across the border, I placed the notebook and my diary at the very bottom of my bag and wrapped them in several layers of paper. If someone had informed the appropriate services that I was carrying such objects, they would certainly have found them on me, but no one informed on me (although some people knew).”

The text of the diary is interspersed here with entries from the radio telegrams notebook. Zhdarkin’s memoirs, as narrated to Dr Shubin, complete his account.

To Warrant Officer Valentine Matveichuk

[military district communications centre]

Dear Valentine!

When you receive this notebook, please contact me and let me know so that I don't get worried.

From behind the lines, I wrote a letter to the person to whom

you should deliver everything. In the same notebook, there is a letter to Gomel. Send it, please, in Moscow! I wish you all the best on your journey and hope you reach Moscow successfully. See you later,

Igor

10 October 1987

It is already the second month that I've been in the 6th district – ten days of it in Cuito Cuanavale.

Conditions here are very tense. On 20 August a diversionary group from South Africa, consisting of eight people, blew up a bridge across the Cuito River.

In September, we succeeded in neutralising a group that had been bombarding Cuito Cuanavale with mortar fire.

On 1 October, advisers of the 21st and 25th brigades returned from an operation on the Lomba River. There, on the Lomba, misfortune had befallen them. They had been battered with shells from the rapid-firing guns of the South Africans. As a result, their interpreter Oleg Snitko had his leg broken and his hand torn off. He died within a day and a half. The others also had bad luck. Four of them were wounded and concussed. On 8 October they were flown off to a hospital in Luanda.

Then on 9 October, having replaced them, we departed on a military operation. There are six people in our group – our team leader, Anatoly Mikhailovich Artiomenko; the adviser to the chief of the brigade artillery, Yuri Pavlovich Sushchenko; the technician, Sasha Fatyanov; two specialists from Osa-AK [the anti-aircraft missile system], Slava and Kostya; and myself.

The day before, we covered approximately 11 km and at 10:30 we reached the command post of the 25th brigade. We sat there the whole day and waited tentatively for something to turn up. We were in fact forced to spend the night there.

At around seven o'clock in the evening, I turned on the radio receiver. A concert of Soviet popular songs was transmitted. The songs were, on

the whole, both old and well known, yet all of us at once grew silent and pensive.

But today, on 10 October at 05:30, we hurriedly pushed off from our location and moved forward.

A military column, in general, moves very slowly. The point is that it is advisable not to travel on old used roads because they are constantly mined by UNITA – so our men cut a new road through the forest. The tanks moved forward, and behind them the entire column. For some five hours, we moved only 8 km all in all.

During one of our usual stops, a group of UNITA soldiers bombarded us. It occurred at 11:10, 31 km from Cuito Cuanavale. Our column was bombarded by mortars and attacked with sub-machine-guns. It was our first bombardment in this operation and it happened quite close to Cuito.

Thus we moved on: we moved at most 100 metres before we had to stop and endure a tedious wait while the tanks continued to push our road forward.

At 14:30 we finally managed to cross over the Shambinga River. But before this, at 13:30, we stumbled upon a minefield set up by UNITA. We waited a long time until our engineers found a safe detour.

At 16:10 we stopped in a little wood on the other bank of the Shambinga River. Here we will spend the night.

The crossing of the Shambinga River is quite uncomfortable. Suffice to say that it is completely open on both its banks and swampy too. The Angolans call this kind of surface a *shona*, the same as “flood-lands” in Russian. Only one single road, mined on each side, leads to the river through this *shona*, so that nowhere can one turn around. If the enemy is able to get this road within his gun sights it can become one of the seven circles of biblical hell.

In fact, here on 25 September last year the leader of our group, Anatoly Mikhailovich Artiomenko, was seriously wounded. For all of five days the group had not been able to get across. A shell fragment hit him in the head. But this time we were able to cross without mishap.

11 October 1987

This day was full of events. At six in the morning, the column gathered in military formation for the day's march. We stood for half an hour, waiting for news from the head of our column as to where they were to lead us. By 06:30, UNITA began to fire its mortars. This time, the majority of mortars were being discharged to release incendiary bombs with the exclusive aim of setting our vehicles on fire.

Although the firing continued for 30 minutes, UNITA did not achieve its objectives. At that, we pushed forward.

During the course of the day, South African planes appeared twice. The first time was at 11:10 and then at 14:30. Our Osa-AK anti-aircraft missile system tracked them but two aircraft were actually shot down in the region of the 21st brigade.

At 15:35 our column was once more attacked by UNITA forces. A ferocious battle broke out and continued for almost 40 minutes. The men covering the flanks of the column performed well by discovering the bandits in time. The attack was successfully repulsed. Five UNITA soldiers were killed, and many weapons were taken.

On this day we had our dinner in the dark, as we stopped at our overnight spot quite late and it gets dark here around six in the evening.

12 October 1987

Today, from 06:45 in the morning, our column once again ran into attacking UNITA forces. The shooting continued for 20 minutes. The column was again fired upon with incendiary mortar shells. But the return fire of our combat teams (B-10 anti-tank recoilless guns; 120-mm mortars; BM-21 40-barrel 122-mm calibre volleys fired from Ural trucks) didn't permit the UNITA forces to aim their guns accurately at us. Only one single mortar shell landed on one of the vehicles in our column while the rest exploded without any damage.

At 10:40, the South African Air Force again appeared, bombing the location of the 21st brigade.

For the rest of the day, nothing of any particular importance happened except that now on the R-123 radio station we hear, quite clearly and

precisely, South Africans discussing events among themselves. Thank God I still remember a little English. And then they suddenly began talking in Polish over the air. I could clearly make out a few phrases: “What do you want?” “Very good.” And then, “I am listening attentively.” “Thank you.” The reply of the second speaker was not audible. For a long time we speculated on what this meant until we realised that in fact maybe these were Polish émigrés in the South African army.

13 October 1987

Today at 05:10, four South African planes appeared in the area of the 21st and 59th brigades. The brigades opened furious fire with all types of weaponry. The entire sky looked like a rainbow. As a result, one plane was put out of action, while a second was hit in the tailpipe by a type of rocket; but, although hit, managed to escape. The rest dropped their bombs in disorder and made off.

Our anti-aircraft missile system had begun work already at 04:30.

On this day, there were three more South African air raids – at noon, at 15:00 and at 17:00 – as if according to schedule. We stayed at the overnight spot near the old UNITA base. We could see the huts, which were still intact with their communication trenches and so forth. A real fortress, I would say.

I completely forgot that on this same day, at 14:30, we had discovered a large storehouse belonging to UNITA at the source of the Cunzumbia River. There, ammunition dumps of Chinese origin were found with 120 mortar shells for 60-mm mortars, 111 mortar shells for 81-mm mortars, 100 projectiles for a modified manual anti-tank grenade launcher (RPG-7V), and 15 440 cartridges for the updated Kalashnikov sub-machine-gun, the AKM.

14 October 1987

Today, at 07:30, we finally reached the command post of the 21st brigade and operational group. Here we met advisers and specialists of the 47th brigade and of the anti-aircraft missile system (nine people in all). So many horrors they recounted to us.

During the offensive a lot of hope had rested on the 2nd tactical group, to which the 47th brigade belongs. The 47th brigade was reinforced with a tank battalion, artillery and the anti-aircraft missile system. The group's mission was to secure the right flank during the general offensive. It was commanded by Maj. Tobiash, chief of staff of the 6th military district.

But the group wasn't up to the task. According to what was said, the commanding officers drank too much during the operation. The offensive was conducted sluggishly, without enthusiasm, although there was practically no serious resistance in its path.

In the end though, it was like a clap of thunder in a clear sky. The offensive of other brigades went more or less successfully, and UNITA suffered defeat after defeat. It seemed that victory was already close.

But, as had happened many times before, the South Africans, seeing this process, didn't leave UNITA to be wiped out. Skilfully exploiting the mistakes and miscalculations of FAPLA, they openly penetrated the territory of Angola. They declared publicly that the South African army was in Angola to save UNITA.

This was the beginning of the operation's downfall, the beginning of a tragedy. First of all, we received news that Soviet advisers of the 21st brigade had been wounded and then heard about the death of the interpreter, Oleg Snitko. Afterwards, when we encountered our comrades from the 47th brigade, we heard details from them about their brigade's rout.

The brigade suffered three attacks from regular South African forces. The flight, which began after the second attack, turned into panic with the launching of the third.

There were many reasons for this: running out of ammunition; the cowardliness of the officers; the absence of precise instructions to the troops engaged; their terror of facing the South Africans; and finally, the fact that there was a bridge across the river Lomba just where the brigade stood. Everybody soon found out about it, and if it hadn't existed perhaps no one would have tried to flee.

Many Soviet specialists serving here in the district combat brigades had been in Afghanistan and had never experienced such horrors before. One said: "When the South African artillery began to fire, I felt particularly

terrified. Then came the South African Air Force and we had very little room on the ground. But the worst was when the Angolans turned to flight and began to throw away their equipment ...”

This was just what happened with the 47th brigade. As long as the brigade commander maintained radio contact with the commander of the tank battalion, everything remained relatively normal. But then the tank battalion commander was hit and, being wounded, he moved to another tank which was also hit and from which he then could not crawl out. Meanwhile the tank platoon commander who was next to him fled. The tank battalion commander (his name is Silva) was then taken prisoner by the South Africans.

At the time of its flight during the crossing of the Lomba River, the 47th brigade lost 18 tanks, 20 armoured troop carriers, four D-30 122-mm guns, three BM-21 rocket launchers, four Osa-AK anti-aircraft mobile rocket launchers, two Osa-AK transport cars, one P-19 radar station, heavy automobiles, broadcasting stations, mortars, grenade throwers, approximately 200 pieces of small arms, and other things.

The loudly proclaimed promises about the safety of Soviet advisers and specialists were forgotten. The BTR-60PB armoured troop carrier of the Soviet advisers departed, last but one, over the bridge; by order of the brigade commander it was done without cover, and it was protected by only 11 people. Within 15 minutes, the position where it had been before was exploded by a South African AML-90 armoured troop carrier.

There was terrible panic and confusion all around. The South Africans were shooting all over the place, not sparing ammunition. No one knew clearly whether to run or what to do. The one thing everyone wanted was to get across to the other bank as fast as possible. The so-called ‘commissioner’ for organising the crossing was one of the first to escape.

However, only three Strela-10 anti-aircraft systems, two armoured troop carriers, two EE-25 vehicles and one Land Rover got across to the other side of the Lomba. Nothing more could be saved. And if the South Africans had sent over only one company to the other side and opened fire against the Angolans on that bank, the entire 47th brigade would have landed at the bottom of the Lomba.

The Soviet advisers had to abandon their armoured troop carrier and set it on fire, and then they crawled, hugging the ground, for 1.5 km along the *shona* to the other bank of the Lomba. They crawled under fire, throwing away everything except their weapons, while the South Africans fired straight at them. Then the swamps began. Our men overcame this too and there remained only a short distance to the bank. Completely exhausted, they decided to pause for breath. The South Africans had guessed from the time lapse that they had already got across, so they began to shoot along the shore. Shells were exploding 10 to 20 metres from them and three fell into the swamp just five metres away. What saved them was that the shells fell into the swamp and on the *shona* (which was also sticky and swampy), and sank before they exploded. This was the only reason why no one was wounded, apart from injuries from small fragments.

The crushing defeat of the 47th brigade seriously affected the 16th, 21st, and 59th brigades as well as the military situation as a whole. Now the brigades were positioned on the line formed by the Cunzumbia River. Such was the state of affairs when we arrived.

15 October 1987

Yesterday and today we settled down in our new positions, and checked them out with the commander of our 21st brigade and Maj. Batista, the group commander; and at brigade headquarters we familiarised ourselves with the situation. The day passed quietly. South African planes flew by and we heard the rumble of artillery fire from the direction of the 16th and 59th brigades. There was shelling there and our brigade supported them with artillery fire.

16 October 1987

In the morning, Maj. Batista drove off to the command post of the 1st tactical group, took leave of us, thanked us for everything, and asked us to support the brigade commander.

An order came from the district command: brigades must take defensive positions in those places where they already find themselves. They must assume responsibility for each allotted zone and must conduct

thorough searches constantly to foil enemy infiltration and hinder their activities. This led to a series of local operations by forces of up to two battalions led by brigade commanders.

This afternoon, we moved our mission to a new position, closer to the brigade command post.

17 October 1987

This morning, as we were sitting at the table, all of a sudden at 06:50 a South African plane swooped down towards us. Our anti-aircraft troops simply failed to see it in time. There was a long delay before we could open fire. The aircraft hit the forward positions of our brigade's 1st infantry battalion. Luckily there were no losses.

The second such incident was at 08:15. In both cases, our anti-aircraft gunners weren't able to react in time. The problem was that the South Africans had grown resourceful. They are well aware that there's an anti-aircraft missile system here and so they fly low along the bank of the Cunzumbia out of sight of the missile system and then, making a U-turn, they fly over the target they want to bomb.

The third incident occurred at 10:10. Four Mirage aircraft struck the brigade in the area of the 3rd battalion. This time, our anti-aircraft gunners performed wonderfully well. Two planes were shot down – one by a Strela-10 anti-aircraft missile system and the other by a ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft auto-cannon. Both fell very close to us. Actually, the Angolans insist that they brought down a third aeroplane as well but that it allegedly fell on the far bank of the Cunzumbia River. The brigade commander sent task forces to the two downed planes. For the moment, we are still awaiting the results.

In the evening, the task forces returned. As often occurs with the Angolans, they claimed not to have found the planes, they don't know where they are, etc., etc. The explanation is simple, of course: they were afraid to run into UNITA.

18 October 1987

Today is Sunday and we've decided to spend the day resting in the hope

that there won't be any planes and that the South Africans are also taking the day off. The day passed quietly and only at 19:05 did the alarm announce enemy air activity.

Indeed, as we knew later, the South Africans began bombarding the 59th brigade 15 km away from us with a rocket-propelled Kentron [the Valkiri multiple-launch rocket system]. Its missiles shone brightly, which was why we saw them so clearly.

19 October 1987

Today at 04:00 the brigade commander, N'Geleka, received an order to go to the source of the Cuzizi River, in the area of the 59th brigade, and to be ready to launch a counterattack. After putting into effect a preliminary artillery bombardment, we departed from our place at 11:30. We covered 16 km that day, dodging a lot. We were not fired upon.

20 October 1987

We continued to move. During the day we covered 26 km. The column was shelled but fortunately most shells fell short so we suffered no losses. The brigade commander and the artillery captain wrestled all day with two central problems, to work out our exact location and where the enemy artillery was shelling us from. The problem was very complicated: they had to work out the shell calibres, the range of the shells and the places where the enemy might be, but they couldn't agree.

We settled down for the night. There was artillery fire in the direction of our brigade, but once again everything turned out fine.

21 October 1987

We sent reconnaissance groups to find the river and determine more precisely where we are situated. We stayed put all day, waiting for them to return. The whole day a 106.7-mm M40 gun on a Land Rover bombarded us. It was located somewhere between us and the 59th brigade and was firing alternately at us and them. As a result, we haven't yet figured out where we are. Surrounding us is forest and nothing else.

22 October 1987

Early this morning we formed a column and advanced. At 15:30, we reached our destination at the Cuzizi River. The enemy's artillery bombards us almost nonstop but so far without any direct hits. It would seem that we've confused the enemy so much, they can't pinpoint us and so they're just trying to find us haphazardly. The shells fall quite near our brigade, but our artillery doesn't respond.

23 October 1987

The enemy shelled us all night. Shells with a very disgusting howl and whistle flew past us and very close too. A whole row of them fell very near by onto the opposite bank of the Cuzizi.

In the morning we urged the brigade commander to tell us exactly where we were. He showed us the wreckage of the plane hit over the Cunzumbia. According to him, the pilot's corpse had been so badly burnt, it wasn't possible to find any documents on it.

At 08:30 our brigade's artillery discharged several salvoes at previously planned targets. We fired BM-21s and D-30 122-mm howitzers from temporary positions, and then left very fast. In less than an hour the South Africans began to fire at those positions, evidently trying to locate our brigade. While they were firing, generally at random, we listened hard to where the shells were flying and fairly often were forced to fall to the ground – to “greet our Mother Earth”, as our artillery adviser likes to say.

That evening we received an order from the tactical group commander, Maj. Batista, to fire at a South African column near the 59th brigade. Our BM-21 rocket launcher²¹ could fire 34 shells. In fact, this very much enraged the South Africans, who almost immediately began shooting back at us with their 106.7-mm guns, which couldn't be silenced until midnight. The BM-21 could barely move away. Our wretched armoured troop carrier shook and we felt very uncomfortable, particularly in view of the howling and whistling of the shells flying over our heads. They exploded 300 metres away from us. Luckily, the South Africans apparently still hadn't worked out our brigade's exact location.

24 October 1987

This morning we got an order to depart and go to the 59th brigade on the Miane River. At 11 o'clock we formed a column and set off. After 3 km we heard explosions behind us. It was the South Africans who, assuming we were still there, had begun to bombard our previous positions.

That day we advanced 6 km altogether. During the march our water carrier collided with a log and overturned right onto the leg of one of our guards. With difficulty, we managed to set the carrier back on its wheels and release the guard.

At 14:20 the column on our left flank was attacked by the enemy and an artillery bombardment began. The battle lasted 20 minutes.

At 15:40 the enemy once again bombarded our column with gunfire and mortar fire. One of these mortar shells exploded 20 metres away from our armoured troop carrier, between two Engesa cars. The wheels of both vehicles were pierced by flying fragments. One Angolan perished and several people were wounded.

Around 17:00 I went to the communications platoon of our brigade to transmit information to Cuito via the Racial radio station. No sooner had I got ready to transmit than the sub-machine-guns began and then mortar fire. Several bullets whizzed past, and I only just succeeded in jumping off the armoured troop carrier and creeping under it, next to several members of the Angolan signal corps who were already there. Even the brigade commander's dog was hiding there and whined timidly at every shell.

When the shooting stopped I went back to the armoured troop carrier for us advisers, deciding to transmit information via our R-123 radio station. I had only just climbed aboard when the shells began again and continued without interruption during the 20 minutes I was transmitting.

Night passed quietly. Only around 22:00 did they begin shooting at us – several times.

25 October 1987

In the morning we resumed our march. From 07:40 to 10:20 we marched under constant bombardment from 81-mm mortars. We had to stop

several times because groups of the enemy were attacking our column and fighting was breaking out.

Around 15:00 we made contact with sub-units of our 1st tactical group. We refuelled them and replenished their oil. The 59th brigade was still several kilometres away. Around 17:00, they were bombed by enemy planes. The South Africans had worked out a new tactic. First they'd launch an artillery bombardment and all the Angolans would run for cover, including the anti-aircraft gunners. And then, unexpectedly, their planes would appear, execute the strike and then fly off faster than the anti-aircraft gunners could come out of their hiding places.

We had just sat down to eat when we heard the 'mumbling' of a Kentron rocket-propelled system. It's a South African anti-personnel system, immensely movable on its truck undercarriage and with a maximum range of 22 km. Its projectiles are filled with small balls possessing massive destructive power.

We had already worked out clear rules for ourselves under bombardment: in a fraction of a second no one remained at the table. The South Africans carried on with their Kentron for a short while and followed up with a couple of 120-mm mortars and at last quietened down. Probably they simply decided to wish us *bon appetit*, the rascals.

26 October 1987

This morning we took leave of our tactical group and pushed forward. The South Africans were again late with their shelling and began to fire on our positions after we'd already left. After two days of shelling, our brigade lost four men killed and 22 wounded. Today, towards evening, we finally reached our destination. We set up camp and dug ourselves in. No one knows how long we'll remain here.

27 October 1987

Last night and the whole of today we were enveloped by an unceasing din of artillery fire. The South Africans shelled the 59th brigade, the crossing over the Shambinga River and our tactical group. They haven't disturbed us as yet, perhaps because they still don't realise where we are.

For dinner, the Angolans had caught a goat. They brought us a whole leg as a gift. We left it to stew with potatoes for supper. We found it so tasty, we licked the whole pot.

I began composing songs about how we now live in Angola. Our men listened and approved and some of them also began making up songs. Of course, we can't refine their style because they're full of bad language, especially when we recall the South Africans and UNITA. They get on our nerves with their bombardments – we can't even eat in peace.

28 October 1987

Today, from morning to night, there was enemy artillery fire from all sides and in every direction. It's easier to calculate how much time we were outside than in hiding. During the day our brigade chief of staff, accompanied by the 2nd infantry battalion of our brigade, left for the tactical group to get supplies earmarked for us from the 25th brigade. At the same time, our brigade chief of staff was to make contact with the 59th brigade, joining up with them as well.

29 October 1987

Last night the enemy hit the 59th brigade with 148 shells. In the morning, we found out that one officer, one sergeant and four soldiers from our brigade had been killed. There were many wounded and one officer and one soldier are still missing.

At six o'clock, the enemy decided to bid us "good morning" and "bon appétit". We were having breakfast when suddenly there was a shot near by, not far off as usual. Through habit, we cocked our ears to hear where the shot was flying. Then our air defence specialist Slava shouted, "Get down!" Almost immediately a powerful explosion reverberated all around and I fell from my chair, hitting the ground. I felt a sharp pain in my left shoulder – was it bruised or dislocated? But the next second I dived under our armoured troop carrier. Everybody else ran off in all directions.

As it turned out, the enemy had bombarded us with a 120-mm mortar and one shell exploded 20 metres from us during breakfast. My shoulder hurts very much now and I can't raise my arm.

And then at 14:00 we heard frightening news. At 13:10 the enemy had bombarded the 59th brigade near us with chemical weapons containing poison gas. Many people had been poisoned. Four had lost consciousness and the brigade commander was coughing blood. The Soviet advisers there were also affected. The wind was blowing nearby and everyone was complaining of violent headaches and nausea. This news greatly disturbed us since we don't have any gas masks whatsoever.

30 October 1987

Last night the enemy continued to strike at us by means of large-calibre, heavy artillery, launching shell after shell over our heads. Our brigade's artillery reconnaissance simply can't locate this battery. The scouts have constant problems. Either they don't receive any radio signals or they lack the proper appliances, or they cannot operate them. And it's like that the whole time. A reluctance to do anything is evident, and of course fear of the South Africans, particularly after they used poison gas.

This morning is much quieter, with the exception of two air raids and the enemy's intermittent shooting here and there. Could it be that we're already getting used to this pattern? And yet, what a dangerous habit ...

We asked the military district command to send us gas masks, and also to provide our whole brigade with means of self-defence. So far, there has been no reaction.

31 October 1987

Yesterday, between 18:40 and 21:00, the enemy launched intensive artillery and mortar fire, but today it was quiet the whole day! What can this mean? Is it the last day of the month for the enemy and so either devoted to room cleaning or stocktaking? This quiet is not a good sign.

I recall a film about the Great Patriotic War.²² There one of our soldiers tosses and turns on a plank bed in a dugout and finally says miserably: "If they would only shoot, otherwise we can't sleep at all!" That's just how it is with us – we've already got used to falling asleep to the sound of bombardment. But right now there's a deafening silence.

1 November 1987

The silence continued through the night. And today is the birthday of our group leader, Anatoly Mikhailovich Artiomenko. He is 40 years old. The day was fine and not too hot, but the South Africans managed to spoil our fun. At noon, planes flew over the 59th brigade near by, and they dropped more than ten 500-kilogram bombs. So far we still don't know the extent of the casualties. Then our artillery decided to put the enemy's 155-mm howitzer which had been constantly bombarding us out of action. The Angolans fired once from a BM-21 but then contact with the launcher was broken off. In response, the angry South Africans opened fire with their own howitzers. They fired very accurately and at short intervals.

During one of these pauses we moved, together with our group leader, to the command post dugout to ask the brigade commander what new tasks he had received. We were sitting in his so-called study when suddenly the bombardment began again, and this time they were shooting right at the command post. One of the shells landed in a tree near the dugout. At first I couldn't understand what had happened. The dugout had crumbled and because of the dust we couldn't see anything.

My ears rang as at Easter with all the church bells pealing. Just then, a soldier flew in among us. He was standing in the ditch near the dugout and a fragment of the shell had cut his hand. The brigade commander ordered him to hurry over to the clinic. When I finally got out of the dugout, my clothes and right hand were stained with the blood of this soldier. Apparently, during the confusion, we had bumped into each other.

As the group leader said later: "At that moment, we were reborn." I'd been sitting right in front of the entrance and amazingly not a single shell fragment had hit me. Then we noticed that, within a radius of 30 metres of the explosion, all the shrubbery and small saplings had been completely smashed by the shell fragments. All of a sudden, I could hardly hear with my right ear. Our leader has a constant, awful, small ringing noise in his head. This is how the South Africans deliver birthday greetings. My shoulder hurts.

2 November 1987

This morning our group, consisting of the 1st and 3rd infantry battalions of our brigade, a tank battalion, air assault companies attached to it from the tactical group, and subdivisions of the 59th brigade, launched a combing operation throughout the area. It will take four days. The brigade's chief of staff heads our two battalions. So far we've not received any news about them.

At 15:30, as we later found out, the 3rd battalion of our brigade got into a battle with UNITA. The result was four UNITA soldiers killed, while our men captured a 60-mm mortar and one AK machine gun with four cartridges. Our losses were one soldier killed, three severely wounded and six lightly wounded.

3 November 1987

The day began with two South African air raids at 05:00, consisting of seven planes. At 13:20 our brigade's 1st battalion, which is continuing the combing operation, discovered a manned UNITA base. In the resulting skirmish seven UNITA soldiers were killed and we captured a radio station, 13 automatic rifles and one anti-tank rocket. On our own side, there were no losses.

4 November 1987

Yesterday evening at 21:00 hours, the enemy subjected our brigade's 3rd battalion to a powerful bombardment from its Kentrons and 106.7-mm guns. The third battalion commander and his chief of staff were seriously wounded, the chief logistics officer and the officer of the special department [concerned with state secrets] were killed, another two soldiers were also killed and seven wounded.

I established radio contact with our advisers at Cuito Cuanavale. They said they too had been bombarded but everything had turned out well.

On 2 November, at the UNITA base, our troops had captured copies of *Kwacha*, the official UNITA magazine. Here we saw a photo of the former chief of staff of the 16th brigade, Captain Luis Antonio Mango, who had gone over to the side of UNITA. Our team leader, Anatoly Mikhailovich

Artiomenko, knew him well and had in fact worked with him last year when Luis Mango was still 'one of ours'. But in April this year, he defected to UNITA. Of all the things to happen!

From 14:00 to 16:00 the enemy launched a particularly intensive bombardment. From each of two Kentrons six or seven salvoes were fired against the defensive areas of our brigade and the 59th brigade too. Also at 14:00, the 1st infantry battalion of our brigade engaged UNITA south of the Lomba. We captured six grenades, one flare, one anti-tank missile and one operational map.

Today at 17:00 hours, the 1st tactical group reached our brigade. We gave them 200 litres of diesel fuel and benzene, and they removed the seriously wounded.

5 November 1987

Today at midday the 1st battalion returned. They brought yet another radio station, captured at the same UNITA base. At the same time, documents of UNITA's 4th regular battalion, which operates in that district, were also taken from the base. Among these documents there is a diary of military activity from June 1986 to September 1987. In it, all the groups of our forces are listed, including our leadership, and the results of the 4th regular battalion battles, its victories and losses. There is a map of the Cunjamba district, made in Lisbon by means of aerial photographs, and an outline of Cuito Cuanavale district drawn by hand. Letters and other odd papers were also found.

6 November 1987

Last night between 21:00 and 23:00 the enemy once again bombarded us with his Kentrons and recoilless guns. Two men were killed and one wounded.

Today the Soviet senior adviser to the military district command congratulated us on the coming holiday²³ and sent a telegram from Cuito. We congratulated all of them in reply.

And today our brigade artillery commander told us that the coordinates of the gun battery that was constantly bombarding us had finally been

fixed. If it fires on us again, our own artillery will be able to retaliate. Let's wait and see.

At 17:00 an enemy reconnaissance group stumbled upon our forces in the district of our first infantry battalion. There was powerful crossfire but no serious results.

7 November 1987

Last night, from 22:00 to 23:30, the enemy bombarded us with 155-mm cannons and Kentrons from the source of the Lomba River. Our own forces retaliated by firing against the Kentrons with BM-21 rocket launchers and D-30 122-mm guns. So far, the results are still unknown. Our advanced battalion posts sent us news about vehicles moving from the source of the Lomba across the Lukaia and the area between the Miane and Colui rivers.

The enemy has twice launched attacks against the 1st battalion. The first time was at 12:30 and the second at 14:00. The point is that the 1st battalion is occupying the same heights from which the enemy earlier on shelled Cuito Cuanavale with 155-mm long-range guns. So the enemy is right now doing all he can to recapture these heights.

Around 15:00 the enemy began to shell us with time fuses. The air is full of exploding shit which doesn't land on the ground but showers fragments on everyone below. This is something quite new!

The enemy once again attacked the 1st battalion. Total losses from all attacks: two men killed and seven wounded. Nothing is known about the enemy's own losses.

At 16:30 a column from the 25th brigade reached us. They brought food supplies to our brigade and letters for us Soviet advisers. As they approached us, the enemy began to shell them but everything was all right.

8 November 1987

All night the enemy was enraged that the column had reached us and that they could not destroy it. The sons of bitches launched mortar rounds and artillery shells all the time!

Following an order received yesterday, we set off this morning in the

direction of the Vimpulo River, in the area of the 1st tactical group. The 25th brigade occupied our place. Also the 1st battalion of our brigade remained in its positions. The 59th brigade who'd stood next to us was to move out a little later and go directly to Cuito Cuanavale.

We moved forward through a dense forest, advanced 16 km and finally reached the Vimpulo River. Strangely, we were not attacked or fired upon. It was simply amazing!

Indeed, later on, the 59th brigade reported that at 10:00 our positions had been subjected to a powerful bombardment but by then we were no longer there. Success has stayed with us up to now!

In our new site, we took up positions in the hills. Nothing is clear at this stage – not where they're shooting from or what they're shooting at. We hear explosions on all sides, for the moment more or less far from us.

9 November 1987

All night we heard the rumble of engines and nearby explosions. It was the 59th brigade approaching us, but the South Africans were 'escorting' them with their artillery.

In the morning we went down to meet them. We saw our fellow Soviet advisers. They felt that everything was under control. They had more or less regained composure since the South Africans attacked them with poison gas on 29 October. Their faces were happy – after all, they were returning 'home' to Cuito. They had been in the forest for almost four months. It's difficult to imagine such a life – you need to have lived through it yourself. We, for example, have been in the forest exactly one month today, yet I have the feeling that already half my life has slipped by and that all the days have merged into one, that each day is one and the same. If it's suddenly quiet you begin to go crazy, wondering why the enemy does not fire and what they have in mind. When the shooting starts, you wait for it to end. That's all. And so on and so forth – every day.

Around eight o'clock, we got information that the 16th brigade (based near the Shambinga River, 20 km away) had been subjected since three o'clock in the morning to heavy fire and attacks from regular South African battalions. The Shambinga area lies right next to Cuito Cuanavale

and already the South Africans have reached there, but after all they were on the river Lomba not long ago anyway.

In the afternoon, the advisers attached to the 25th brigade (now back in our old position) informed us that at around one in the morning the enemy had tried to penetrate their defensive line. When that failed, the attackers began to throw everything they had at the brigade. Later on they again tried several times to break through and have continued with this racket up till now. The position of the 25th brigade is precarious. After all, apart from the presence of our battalion they are practically alone out there.

10 November 1987

Last night passed more or less peacefully. But this morning the brigade commander said he had received a telegram from district headquarters with this order: stay on constant alert because the enemy can always attack, relying on surprise.

And that's just what happened. At seven o'clock, artillery and mortar fire rained down on us. At that exact moment I was in radio contact with our military district. For more than an hour and a half the South Africans keep on bombarding us with 106.7-mm guns and 120-mm mortars.

Shells fly past our heads even now. What saves us is that we are in position on a hill and so they either fall short or else fly over us. And yet a number of pieces got within 50 metres of us and immediately the fragments began to scream in a horrible way.

The advisers of the 16th brigade gave us their coordinates. We glanced at the map and sighed: saving themselves from yesterday's South African attack, they had covered at least 20 km and are now located 4 to 5 km from the ford across the Shambinga River (15 km from Cuito Cuanavale). They informed us that their equipment and materiel had been reduced to less than half the normal amount.

During the afternoon I intercepted a telegram stating that two tanks of the 16th brigade, towed by trucks, together with only 100 men from two battalions of the 16th brigade, had reached the new area of the 16th brigade. They had then set off for Cuito Cuanavale. That's how the South

African wore out the 16th brigade.

Then once again, I communicated with the 16th brigade and ascertained that they had moved not 20 km but 30 km or more, fleeing from the South Africans. Afterwards, I again intercepted one of their telegrams, where they mentioned how much materiel they still had available. It was one BM-21 rocket launcher, seven Grad-P portable guns, one 82-mm mortar, one RPG-7 grenade launcher and one AGS-17 automatic grenade launcher and some ammunition.

The 59th brigade sent a message about crossing the Shambinga River. The South Africans were subjecting them to heavy fire from 155-mm long-range howitzers.

11 November 1987

Today, during the morning, the South African Air Force paid us a visit. Evidently, they simply wished to greet us on the occasion of the 12 years of Angolan independence and, well, of course they brought some 'gifts'.

But yesterday we spent the whole evening watching shells from South African 155-mm howitzers flying through the air. They are missile-propelled and glow during the boost phase of the flight. The South Africans directed their gunfire towards where the 59th brigade was situated on the other bank of the Shambinga River. We were able to calculate the distance to the howitzers and measure their approximate coordinates. As of this morning we were able to communicate these to our military district command. At 6:00, I entered communication and found out that the command had restrained the 59th brigade, ordered it to occupy the defence on the bank of the Shambinga River and given it a pile of tasks to carry out. And to think that they had so wanted to go home!

Telegram 91 – to Cuito

11.11.1987 – 09:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

The enemy hits each brigade separately and nothing is being undertaken to inflict a blow collectively. Thus all the brigades

will be killed off one by one. There are few military personnel in the combat units. Commanding officers of all ranks are scared. They are scared to start counteractions against the enemy.

Brigade Commander Adviser

Something quite unimaginable is happening now. The Angolan troops are almost completely demoralised; the brigades are on average at 45 per cent strength. For every 10 to 15 shells launched by the enemy, the Angolans are able to send only one, if even that much. Our reconnaissance operates poorly and the enemy knows everything about us. The Angolans fear the South Africans like fire and if they hear that their “Buffalo” is part of an attack, they throw away all their equipment in panic and flee.

“Buffalo” – this is a battalion of mercenaries and bandits, known for its horrible brutalities throughout much of Angola. It consists of 12 companies, each comprising 100 men. Each company has its own name (“Lion” “Fox”, “Wolf”, etc.). They are allocated in one or two individual companies between regular South African units. Sometimes they operate independently.

Such are the conditions of the war. UNITA is conducting partisan activities with guerrillas wandering all over the place, attacking and bombarding from all sides. The South Africans, for their part, don’t hesitate to attack frontally, and strike along our flanks and rear. The South African artillery and air force move with impunity at all times, while our own air force is afraid to show itself and, if it does so at all, it’s only at a high altitude.²⁴ And despite all this, orders and instruction continue to stream out from the district military command to occupy defensive positions, to create a strong reserve (but out of what?) for confronting the flanks and rear of the attacking enemy, etc., etc.

Telegram 92 – to Cuito

11.11.1987 – 11:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

A prisoner was taken in the area. I shall report results after

interrogation.

Brigade Commander Adviser

Telegram 93 – to Cuito

11.11.1987 – 12:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

The prisoner is from a field battery attached to the 4th regular battalion. There are two 106.7-mm guns, two M-120 mortars mounted on Land Rovers in the battery. He was sent with a group of three men as fire observation personnel. The battery is located at the head of the Cuzizi River and the 4th regular battalion is quartered on the higher land area between the Colui and Mianei rivers. Ammunition supply is done at night. They deliver ammunition by Unimog vehicle. Weapons sites are constantly changed. There are only 20 military personnel in the battery. No guard. The prisoner has been serving for three years in UNITA. A SR A-84 radio station was captured with the prisoner. Behind the head of the Lomba River is a base from where ammunition delivery takes place. This is where the South Africans are located.

Brigade Commander Adviser

This morning a prisoner was captured in the area of the third battalion. He turned out to be an artillery reconnaissance scout from the artillery battery attached to UNITA's 4th regular battalion. He himself was an African named Eugene Kayumba, who had served UNITA for three years, born in the province of Huambo. In his battery they had two 106.7-mm guns and two 120-mm mortars set up on Land Rovers. According to his information, the battery is situated at the source of the Cuzizi River, while the 4th regular battalion is between the Colui and the Mianei rivers. He had been sent in a group of three men (a scout, a radio operator and a guard) with the mission of spotting our fire and making a reconnaissance

of our positions. Their batteries are constantly changing firing positions, they are supplied with ammunition at night, and they move around on Unimog vehicles. A battery consists of 20 men. Together with him, we captured a broadcasting station, SR A-84, of English make.

According to him, the South Africans are constantly moving in the rear, while the UNITA troops are moving in front of them. If UNITA gets into a tight spot, the regular South African forces move there, open artillery fire and call in their air force. In important military sectors, the South Africans themselves enter the battle, as in fact occurred with the 16th brigade on 9 November.

Some bases are sited at the source of the Lomba River, and ammunition is brought up from there. That place is occupied by the South Africans.

The prisoner constantly gets confused and tries to get out of answering and plays the fool, although it is clear that he knows a lot. He claimed he had long wished to desert but couldn't get the chance. He said he had been taken away by UNITA to their 'capital', Jamba, by force and then sent to Tikra, UNITA's artillery centre, 20 km away. There, the UNITA personnel were trained by their South African advisers.

12 November 1987

In the morning I turned on the radio and found out that Cuito Cuanavale had been shelled during the night by long-range guns. Fortunately there were no casualties among us and the runway was not damaged.

During the day it was relatively quiet but towards evening the chief adviser of the 59th brigade told us that, at the crossing of the Shambinga River, groups of soldiers from the 16th brigade, including those from the tactical group, were running around with and without materiel, with weapons and without weapons, in a great panic and with 'square eyes'. The 59th brigade fishes them out of the river and assembles them in one spot. The advisers then try to rally these 'runners', pleading with them to calm down but without getting any sense into them. They think only of picking themselves up and clearing out.

The chief adviser of the 59th brigade reported all this to the district military command, who in turn promised to take appropriate measures.

The brigade also reported that one of its tanks got stuck in the mud and by now is buried up to its turret.

At 22:00, instructions were sent to us and to the 25th brigade, which at present is positioned in our old place at the Mianei River. The 25th brigade was to conduct a raid in the area on the River Ube; but we should monitor the district of Viposhto [Vimpulo], where we are now.

13 November 1987

Today I woke up early with water pouring down on me. I'd slept next to our technical officer under our armoured troop carrier as it's more comfortable and not stuffy here and there's more room than in the carrier itself. During the night it had rained, and water collected in the bottom of the troop carrier and then began to run out through all the holes.

Our team leader, Lt.-Col. Anatoly Mikhailovich Artiomenko, sent a telegram to the military district command, with a proposal to change the area of the brigade's defensive positions and occupy the heights of the Viposhto area 5 km away. We'd then be able to cover the area between the Ube River and the Vimpulo with two of our battalions, while keeping the third battalion in the second echelon as a reserve on the west bank of the Vimpulo.

In response, an order came to move to the source of the River Ube and occupy defensive positions there. The brigade commander decided to place one company with its radio station at the Ube, while we (the Soviets) were to move to Viposhto district to be with the military advisers of the tactical group. There we will wait for the arrival of the entire brigade. One battalion had already left for the source of the Ube.

14 November 1987

Today we departed at 06:00 and we wandered around the whole day, covering altogether 13.5 km instead of the 5 km planned before we found the tactical group. At one point we were shot at. In the evening, the enemy launched heavy fire at the Shambinga River crossing and the position of the 59th brigade.

Telegram 102 – to Cuito

14.11.1987 – 17:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

1. We arrived at the checkpoint of the 1st tactical group at 16:00. 337° – 10.5 km from 840 point.²⁵
2. 3rd infantry battalion with material and technical means and the brigade commander are in the defence area.
3. 2nd infantry battalion leaves to take defensive positions in the Ube River head area.
4. 1st infantry battalion is with the 25th infantry brigade.
5. Concerning military personnel, machinery, and armament, see the telegram from 12 November. No changes.

Brigade Commander Adviser

15 November 1987

Telegram 103 – to Cuito

15.11.1987 – 08:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

... brigade commander with 3rd infantry battalion and remaining material and technical means (MTM) left the defence area. Will be here by afternoon.

There are 4 tanks in the tactical group and planetary [universally rotating] steering mechanisms do not work in all of them. Only one tank can be started from the storage battery. What should we do with MTM? We shall not be able to take everything with one trip.

The offensive will not start before 16 November.

Brigade Commander Adviser

This morning a military directive arrived ordering us to launch an offensive in the area of the source of the Ube River, starting it at 10:00.

Everything in this directive was beautifully outlined – where each group should advance to and with what forces, the requirement to use tanks available in the tactical group (but none of them have an operable planetary steering mechanism, so they can only move directly forwards or backwards), and the information that only one tank runs on a storage battery.

The brigade itself is still on the march. One battalion of our brigade is settled, God knows where, and now we have this order to advance! What are they thinking about in the military district command?

Our team leader told the brigade commander that it would be better in fact to begin the offensive right away before the enemy found us, and that all would be well as long as the enemy didn't reconnoitre the area or send observers. The brigade commander replied that everything was held up by the vehicles still on the road. They are allegedly out of order and he'll send people there to help with the clearance. In other words, we understood that today we can't advance anywhere.

Telegram 106 – to Cuito

15.11.1987 – 16:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

1. We will stay overnight in Viposhto.
2. In the morning a column starts for indicated area, unloads and then makes the second trip.
3. If we cross the Shaminga River later by bridge then I consider it reasonable to send Osa-AK and MTM for crossing on the first trip as there could be considerable losses because of artillery bombardment – the 155-mm guns are located further than 21–22 km from us and we can't reach them with BM-21s [rocket launchers].
4. 3rd infantry battalion was ordered to go back.

Brigade Commander Adviser

16 November 1987

Telegram 107 – to Cuito

16.11.1987 – 05:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

1. Artillery bombardment lasted whole night. I specify the results now.
2. Food was received with the last column, we had 20 cars unloaded which were sent with the 59th brigade.

Brigade Commander Adviser

Telegram 108 – to Cuito

16.11.1987 – 17:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

We started at 6 hrs. At 9 hrs we were attacked by the enemy from the prepared line 10° – 12 km, 15° – 11 km. We moved to the area 4° – 12 km, 8° – 12 km where till 15 hrs four times repulsed attacks from all directions.

Big losses, data are being specified. We keep advancing to the head of the Ube River. A captain is captured – an officer of the UNITA logistics service. The prisoner stated that RSA sub-units took part in combat. Coordinates from point 840.

Brigade Commander Adviser

Telegram 109 – to Cuito

16.11.1987 – 22:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

We keep moving to the indicated area. During the breakthrough of the enemy defence lines we shot out 1 AML [armoured personal carrier] and 1 Samil [towing truck]. I personally saw

them burning.

Brigade Commander Adviser

17 November 1987

Telegram 110 – to Cuito

17.11.1987 – 06:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

The column arrived at a bridge [over the Shambinga River]. There is a vehicle jam on the bridge as cars were fuelling the tactical group. Undertaking measures. We will report the results on reaching the area after specification.

The enemy is shelling the column. Request to specify further task after passing the bridge.

Brigade Commander Adviser

And so until eleven o'clock we languished under the bombardment, waiting to cross, without sleep, hungry, and angry as the devil. We suffered the foulest conditions: how much did we have to put up with, only to have a stray shell get us and finish us off?

Finally, around eleven o'clock, we were able to push the truck off the bridge and the entire brigade column rushed to the crossing. We were among the first to get there.

The enemy at first fired at the approaches to the crossing, then at the tail end of the column, then shifted the fire to its head. He was strafing us from his Valkiri missile battery in order to smash the wheels and knock out the lead car, thus stopping the column, and then, at leisure, shooting the column to pieces.

In front of us a tank was dragging the broken-down troop carrier. It was constantly coming to a halt and every time the column stalled. Shells were exploding from all sides. The enemy fired with everything he could: with mortars, recoilless guns, 155-mm howitzers and the Valkiri.

Even when the column began to withdraw from the crossing, the enemy pursued it with a barrage of fire.

At last we were able to escape from the danger zone and immediately set off towards the advisers of the 59th and 16th brigades, who were 3 km further on. There we embraced for a long time, not believing that it was all over, and sharing impressions of the battle with each other.

Telegram 111 – to Cuito

17.11.1987 – 12:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

We reached the area where we want to collect our troops.

Our command post 135° – 8 km from the point 891. We are gathering our military personnel and machinery. Many missing.

Reporting results after calculation.

Brigade Commander Adviser

At 12:00 we went out to the assembly point, several kilometres from the crossing, in order to collect personnel and materiel. Much of this materiel is damaged, and some of the cars were lost on the other bank, the vehicles that remained with us have their wheels and radiators pierced by the Valkiri rocket launchers. All three Osa-AK anti-aircraft missile systems had their equipment disabled after being hit by the Valkiri.

Telegram 112 – to Cuito

17.11.1987 – 19:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

1. Data about military personnel, MTM and machinery are constantly changing. I will report the results after detailed specification.
2. After dark we will carry on picking up the damaged machinery.
3. We have a lot of wheels damaged by Valkiri fire.
4. All the 3 Osa-AK combat vehicles have equipment out of order

due to Valkiri fire.

5. Large number of wounded personnel.
6. The brigade commander says he has continuous communication with the military district and contacts it regularly.

Brigade Commander Adviser

18 November 1987

Telegram 113 – to Cuito

18.11.1987 – 06:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

1. Our losses during November, 16 during the Ube River combat. UNITA was in the forward echelon and was supported by RSA troops.
2. UNITA losses – seven killed, two prisoners. Captured: one AK [Kalashnikov sub-machine-gun], one pistol, one anti-tank missile. A lot of wounded, according to prisoner evidence. RSA losses – two AML-90, three jeeps, two Samil towing trucks.
3. FAPLA losses: killed – 17, severely wounded – 45, lightly wounded – 41, one tank, two EE-25 [trucks] with MTM, two B-10 [anti-tank] guns, one ZU-23 [anti-aircraft auto-cannon].

Brigade Commander Adviser

Today, 18 November, we continued to collect our personnel and materiel and count our losses. On 16 November, from ground fighting and area bombardment, we lost 17 men killed and 86 were wounded. We also lost one tank, two EE-25 trucks, two B-10 anti-tank guns, one ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft automatic coaxial gun. On 17 November, we lost five men killed and 31 wounded.

At 14:00, we once again hit the road. This time, we got the job of occupying defensive positions in the area of the Cuatir River.

This is just a dry description of what actually happened. Is there something still to come at us?

Telegram 114 – to Cuito

18.11.1987 – 09:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

- 1) Three cars with MTM were left behind at the bridge.
Recovering. A lot of wheels and radiators are damaged. We are staying at the assembly area. Command post: 135° – 8 km from the point 891. Battalions are within the radius of 1 km.
- 2) Loss reports cannot be made before evening – Lot of specifications and uncertainties.
- 3) We received the task to move to the Cuatir River area.

Brigade Commander Adviser

Telegram 115 – to Cuito

18.11.1987 – 13:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

What was left at Viposhto:

1. Ammunition for AK (Kalashnikov sub-machine-gun) – 148 500; for PKT [Kalashnikov tank-mounted machine gun] – 63 800; 12.7 mm – 480; 14.5 mm – 15 880; for ZU-23 – 9482; for AGS [grenade launcher] – 1440; for RPG-7 [grenade launcher] – 925; mortar bombs: M-60 – 20; M-81 – 255; M-82 – 1666; M-120 – 53; B-10 [recoilless gun] – 338; BM-21 – 113; for S-2 [Strela air-defence system] – 10 missiles.
2. No oil or grease left. I can't claim that they are destroyed but according to the brigade commander, they are destroyed.
3. FAPLA losses during 17 November: five killed, 31 wounded.
4. We started our movement at 14 hrs.

Brigade Commander Adviser

It is difficult to write about what happened these last two days, 16 and 17 November – you had to have experienced it all directly to understand it. Right now, we ourselves still don't know how we stayed alive and broke out of this hell.

What happened was exactly what we'd warned the brigade commander against. During the night of the 15th to the 16th the enemy made a thorough reconnaissance, sent out spotters, and managed to collect new information about our positions and our brigade column. The enemy also prepared lines of attack. In short, he'd done everything necessary.

On 16 November, at 06:00, we formed a column and stood waiting to begin our march. Just then the fuel servicing truck arrived and we had to refuel our armoured troop carrier. Our team leader Lt.-Col. Anatoly Artiomenko was standing outside the troop carrier when all this began.

The first shell exploded 10 metres away from us. How our team leader survived, God only knows. We were sitting with the artillery adviser on the back seat of the carrier when a wave of air hit us in the face, mixed with sand. The artillery adviser jumped out and began searching and calling our team leader, afraid that he'd been killed. But Anatoly Mikhailovich had already found cover in the troop carrier.

Then began a bombardment, the like of which we, in truth, had as yet never experienced. Shells exploded in salvoes. Everyone was confused, panicked and tried to run away and find shelter anywhere they could. But the South Africans beat them black and blue. The shells rocked our troop carrier from side to side. In fact the South Africans bombarded a very large area because it took us about 40 minutes to escape the zone of fire.

Within the first few minutes, a shell fragment passed right through the leg of one of our guards. We dragged him and another soldier inside the troop carrier. They were gripped by fear, their eyes full of terror. I gave them bandages for the leg of the wounded soldier but they couldn't cope. I had to bandage his leg myself.

When we finally got through the bombardment, we could see only a part of the brigade column led by the brigade logistics officer. His face was contorted and he was terrified and confused. He couldn't give intelligible answers to any of our questions and stuttered badly. The wheels, bodies

and inner compartments of the vehicles had numerous gaping holes left by the shell fragments.

At last our brigade commander appeared and began to restore order. He set up an assembly point and gave instructions. With great difficulty, we reassembled the column and marched to the River Ube. And right there the South Africans attacked us from their prepared positions again. As we'd assumed, the South Africans had prepared themselves well and our brigade was suddenly pinned down in the *shona*, the swampy flood-land close to the river. In front of us, the enemy was positioned in a half circle while to our rear was this cursed *shona* – no vehicles could drive through it, the only way would be to lay a temporary road of logs and brushwood first. Panic broke out as the enemy launched an intensive bombardment and the Angolans fled on foot through the *shona* to the other bank.

Only the appearance of the brigade commander made them stop. He rushed up and down along the whole brigade from front to rear shouting and cursing, making demands, giving orders. The battle continued at the front. A small group of Angolans pressed back an enraged onslaught by the South Africans while the entire brigade stood practically in the swamp with eyes popping in fear and trembling hands. They crowded onto the bank, ready at any moment to throw away everything and run.

The commander ordered the men to construct the temporary brushwood road, to divert their attention from the raging battle. This gave them something to do other than stay rooted in the swamp. A small detachment was sent to the other bank to cover a possible repeat of the last enemy assault.

The bombardment and the attacks persisted with only short interruptions. We prepared for the very worst. We collected our knapsacks and burnt a number of secret documents and papers. It was resolved, in case the South Africans broke through, to burn our armoured troop carrier and our armoured patrol car together with the other two cars, and go on foot through the *shona* on to Cuito Cuanavale.

Of course, we still had a faint hope that the 25th brigade would arrive to help us. But this hope collapsed too when, on the radio, we heard

the voice of the senior adviser to that brigade. He swore and cried out, almost weeping: "Running away ... scum ... they abandon everything ... materiel, weapons ... bloody vermin!" Evidently the South Africans, without hesitation, had turned round and cut into the 25th brigade – and when the Angolans heard they were being attacked by "Buffalo", that's all they needed for them to flee.

When our log road was almost ready the enemy began firing on it, while the soldiers from our covering force were crushed as the enemy appeared on the other bank. The trap, in this way, snapped shut.

The vehicles of our brigade began to go in circles, trying to evade incoming shells. We sat in our armoured troop carrier, wet like small puppies from the terrible heat and stress ...

For us too, nothing was left other than to avoid the shelling. We'd rush to where a shell had just exploded because we knew that for the next few minutes no shell would fall there again. The Angolans who couldn't get into the armoured troop carrier, the armoured patrol car or some other hideout rushed about, ducking behind anything they could find. Cries of the wounded and screams of horror were heard everywhere, covered by the endless explosion of missiles and whistling of shell fragments.

At last we discovered a weak spot in the enemy line and everyone scrambled that way. Why the weak spot, we asked ourselves? Perhaps it was just that the South Africans had finally got tired of playing around with us. But this was hardly likely. We'd been studying their tactics and knew that their style was to hit FAPLA and destroy them completely so as to stop being plagued by them. And they had particular scores to settle with our brigade.

Be that as it may, around 15:00 we were finally able to break out of this hell. Our vehicles gathered together, while our exhausted soldiers collapsed in a heap on the grass. Nearby, maybe 20 metres away, a knocked-out tank from our brigade was burning. Shells and cartridges still inside went on exploding for almost an hour.

At 16:00 we made radio contact with the advisers of the 25th brigade and heard that like us they had also managed to break away from the South Africans and were on the way to join us.

At that moment the soldiers of the reconnaissance company of our brigade brought over a prisoner from UNITA. He was a captain who'd been serving in the rear, supplying the fighting units. He told us that in this battle the 1st brigade of regular South African troops, together with "Buffalo" and a regular battalion of UNITA, had participated in the assault against us.

By this time the 25th brigade was approaching us. When the soldiers caught sight of the UNITA prisoner, both brigades reacted as one. Their eyes lit up and they all shouted: "Finish him off! Don't just stand there, kill him!" Order was restored only with much difficulty. It was now resolved to bring the prisoner to Cuito.

[Comment added by the author in October 2000]

I want in particular to mention Lt.-Col. Yuri Pavlovich Sushchenko. When the reconnaissance soldiers of our brigade captured the UNITA officer and brought him to our troop carrier, soldiers of both brigades gathered there. We heard their shouts – they wanted to kill the prisoner. Yuri Pavlovich and I jumped out of the troop carrier. We were filthy and stressed after the battle. Yuri said to me: "Igor, tell them I won't let anyone approach the troop carrier or the prisoner!" Once outside the troop carrier we saw everyone who'd escaped from the encirclement, armed and yelling. I began shouting at them in Portuguese and they calmed down a bit, but when Yuri Pavlovich began to bawl (with his sub-machine-gun ready to fire): "Get out! I'll kill everybody!" the Angolans shrank back in horror. Although this was ten years ago, I can still tell you just how it was. He really was ready to kill the lot. I respect him as a man. In any case, that's how it was. I said to him "Palych!²⁶ Calm down! OK! Everything is back to normal, everything is fine, everything is normal." Within two months that UNITA captain gave an interview in Luanda. And the entire brigade was sitting and listening to him by radio.

Around 17:00 it was decided to move towards the Shambinga River crossing. At the same time we could see the results of our BM-21 attack. Next to the road stood a knocked-out South African AML-90 armoured

troop transport and a South African Samil-100 towing truck. Both were on fire. As we passed here the enemy began to bombard us again, but this time we were able to get out of this particular danger zone fairly quickly.

It began to get dark. Our brigade commander, Captain N'Geleka, came along to discuss what we should do next – move ahead or stop for an overnight rest. We urged him to go forward to get out of this place as fast as possible. N'Geleka objected that we could face minefields. So our team leader, Mikhailovich, suggested organising the entire brigade into one single column with a single tank and an infantry platoon in front to pave the way. It was agreed to do just that.

We marched the whole night without closing our eyes. Our column moved very slowly as there were no stars or moon visible in the sky, but we kept going and that was the main thing. Our nerves were on edge.

During this move the armoured troop carrier with the advisers of the tactical group moving behind us landed in a ditch. We had to pull it out. No sooner had we done that than our armoured troop carrier flew into another ditch. At this point, a bombardment began. The Angolans pushed one vehicle next to another, jumped out and took refuge. Covered with sweat and in our muddy clothes, we cursed and yanked the Angolans out of their hiding places to get them to move their vehicles that were blocking our attempt to get the troop carrier out of the ditch. The Angolans' hands and feet trembled with terror while shell splinters were whizzing all around. They couldn't start their vehicles and we had to jostle them out of the way.

Finally we were able to pull out our armoured troop carrier and move on. Towards morning, we reached the passage over the river. This was at four o'clock. But we couldn't cross because a truck had overturned on the bridge and there was no way we could drag it off.

[Comment added by the author in October 2001]

In the battle of 16–17 November 1987, when our 21st brigade became encircled, I think everything went wrong because of confusion on our side and the competent precise actions of the South African army and the UNITA troops they led. The South Africans had prepared their positions and worked out everything beforehand, so we fell into a prearranged trap.

The 25th brigade advancing behind us couldn't come to our aid because the South Africans swung round and attacked them.

Here I must add that the leader of our adviser group, Lt.-Col. Anatoly Mikhailovich Artiomenko, was a very balanced, clear-headed man. So when the brigade commander, Captain N'Geleka, came to him with the question, "What should we do? What have we got into?"; Anatoly Mikhailovich calmly took the lead in a decisive way, as shown by everything he did later. I think it's only thanks to him that we got out of the encirclement and the whole shebang.

Because of him, the Angolans put six ZU-23-2s on one line and began firing back against the South Africans. The ZU-23-2 is an anti-aircraft weapon using 23-mm shells – they could pierce South African AML-90 and AML-60 armoured troop carriers. Anyone hit by one of those shells would simply be torn to bits. And thanks to those six lined-up weapons, four South African attacks were repulsed. Let me add that the only units in the brigade capable of military action at that moment were the reconnaissance company of the brigade and the commandant platoon. It was these units, in position with the ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft auto-cannons, who really fought and repulsed the South African attacks.

I heard about this later from the commander of the reconnaissance company who'd witnessed the attack of the "Buffalos" and saw their dead bodies for himself. He personally counted twelve killed, and this was only in the sector he was involved in.

The entire rest of the brigade, stuck in the swampy ground of the shona near the river crossing with their haunted eyes and no idea of what to do, were a crazed horde, wanting only to stay alive and throw away everything they could get rid of.

Clearly, the "Buffalo" battalion split itself up into companies, and attached themselves to every UNITA and South African combat unit – so it never operated as a single battalion but spread out into 12 company units that joined other South African units and sub-units. Well, for sure, one "Buffalo" company fought against us that day. And of course they were beaten off thanks entirely to those Angolans from the reconnaissance company and the commandant platoon.

19 November 1987

This morning our Osa-AK anti-aircraft specialists left for Cuito Cuanavale, together with their battery. There are only four advisers left now.

We are waiting for the march to start. Last night at 20:00, one car from our brigade blew up from an anti-tank mine, and two people were wounded.

At 13:00 we set off. Around 14:00 we were shelled by 60-mm mortars as well as being attacked with small arms, by a UNITA group.

At 18:00 the first battalion was hit by UNITA. Two of our soldiers were killed and five wounded. We killed four UNITA troops and captured one sub-machine-gun. Our soldiers lost two RPG-7 grenade launchers.

We stayed overnight on the heights not far from the Cuatir River.

20 November 1987

Telegram 130 – to Cuito

20.11.1987 – 14:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

Air defence data. There is in the brigade: ZU-23 – 6 [anti-aircraft auto-cannon], Strela-2 PM – 25 [rockets], Missiles – 42, Strela-10 – 1 [rocket], Missiles – 14.

Ammunition: to ZU-23 – 9720.

Air defence losses: ZU-23 – 1 [anti-aircraft auto-cannon], 1 PM [rocket]. Four killed, 12 wounded. Evacuated to Cuito Cuanavale: one officer, two sergeants, seven soldiers.

Brigade Commander Adviser

Today we moved to a new site. We toiled the whole day to make our place, if only from afar, resemble a dwelling more or less suitable for civilised people. We put up stakes and an awning to protect ourselves from rain and sun and we knocked little tables together for utensils and to prepare the food on. In general, it's more or less comfortable now. The whole of today was calm, but our military district headquarters warned us that the South

Africans were regrouping and evidently had something in mind. We were told to be on the alert.

21 November 1987

Yesterday we communicated our coordinates to the military district (in fact the Angolans did the communication with our help) and already today we've received the result: the South Africans began to strike precisely at the command post of our brigade headquarters. We dug a hole under our armoured troop carrier for protection against the bombardment. The whole day was spent doing cross-country racing, running back and forth, hiding from shells. We didn't even have time to eat. Only towards evening did things calm down. It's weird, when we don't tell the military district where we are, nobody shells us. But as soon as we transmit our location, the enemy there and then begins to strike over and over again and with great precision.

Telegram 85 – to Cuito

21.11.1987 – 12:00

To Brigade Commander Adviser

Report hull numbers of your tanks.

Military district Commanding Officer Counsellor

Telegram 133 – to Cuito

21.11.1987 – 15:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

Information about tanks:

- 1) Tank No. 2507G010 – lost at [river] Ube
- 2) Tank No. 5308G005 – speed indicator 00933
- 3) Tank No. 5601E009 – speed indicator 02132 – this tank belongs to the 47th brigade, all the track links are to be replaced. Considerable run-out of lugs, each tank has 90 track links and many are broken.

Brigade Commander Adviser

Telegram 86 – To Cuito

21.11.1987 – 15:00

To Brigade Commander Adviser

It is not clear, on 19 November you had 909 people and now

751. Why? Where are they?

Military district Commanding Officer Counsellor

Telegram 87 – To Cuito

21.11.1987 – 17:00

To Brigade Commander Adviser

Study the issue and urgently report about artillery availability.

You have a big inconsistency in your local figures.

Military district Commanding Officer Counsellor

Telegram 135 – to Cuito

21.11.1987 – 17:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

909 minus 751 is 158. This 158 represents military personnel that can't participate in combat: wounded, ill, located in sub-units and first-aid post.

Brigade Commander Adviser

22 November 1987

The night passed peacefully (for us at least) but the enemy constantly bombarded the brigades linked to us. From daybreak, they attacked first one and then the other brigade. So far the enemy hasn't touched us. Evidently he's going to conduct probes of our defences, looking for weak points.

All this time, the enemy is persistently bombarding Cuito Cuanavale

with 155-mm howitzers. This means our friends over there are also busy with the cross-country racing we made jokes about yesterday.

The surrounding conditions are very uneasy: our reconnaissance and soldiers waiting in ambush are constantly reporting the movement of enemy columns, small UNITA groups and so forth. The enemy in turn continuously bombards our three brigades and Cuito Cuanavale. Evidently they are preparing for an attack.

We have the distinct impression that our lifeless and hapless brigades once again are falling into a trap and this time it might be considerably more serious than before.

23 November 1987

Yesterday evening, we listened to the radio and completely by accident heard the news in Portuguese. It wasn't clear which radio station the broadcast was from, but it sounded like the BBC. They were reporting on the aggression of the South Africans in Angola, i.e. about us.

They said this: "South Africa continues to launch aggressive actions in Angola. In the north of Namibia, on the border of the Angolan province of Cuando Cubango (where we are located) 30 000 South African military personnel, 400 guns of various calibre, and more than 80 aircraft are concentrated. The 8th armoured attack battalion has entered the province of Cuando Cubango. Several South African brigades, together with the 32 [Buffalo] battalion, are operating on Angolan territory. The remaining troops are on combat alert, ready to cross the border at the first order."

We reported all this to our district command. We got a telegram back ordering us to mine the sectors vulnerable to enemy tanks and create anti-tank defences, with five mines per kilometre. How cheerful this made us! We have practically no mines at our disposal, our anti-tank defences are nothing to speak of, only one B-10 anti-tank gun, one BM-21 40-barrel gun firing from a truck, two Grad 1-P portable guns, two tanks, and a few anti-tank grenade launchers. And with this we have to beat off their tanks!

This evening, they've been firing lazily at us, as if unintentionally – apparently only to scare us. But they are bombarding Cuito Cuanavale all the time, trying to put the Cuito landing strip out of action.

24 November 1987

Telegram 140 – to Cuito

24.11.1987 – 06:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

Improving defence from engineering perspective

Concentration of anti-tank means mentioned in the telegram: 2 tanks, 1 B-10 [anti-tank gun] – one for 2 km of defence in the wood; also in battalions there are RPG-7– 42 [anti-tank grenade launchers] in total. No anti-personnel and anti-tank mines at all.

Brigade Commander Adviser

Yesterday at 20:00 we heard a helicopter. As the Angolans told us, clearly the enemy was facilitating the landing of scouts or diversionary groups. For the whole of today, nothing happened except for the 'obligatory' bombardment. But then at 17:00, the South African Air Force swooped down and fired rockets at the brigade command post. The planes came from the direction of the source of the Cuatir River so that our Strela-10 anti-aircraft missile system couldn't catch sight of them.

In the afternoon news, the Angolan radio announced that the Angolan foreign minister, speaking at the UN, accused South Africa of employing chemical warfare against the Angolan army. This occurred on 29 October at the Mianei River, when the South Africans used these chemicals against the 59th brigade next to us. I've already written about the effects.

25 November 1987

Last night we heard the helicopter again. As our brigade reconnaissance has said, South Africans are concentrated 20 km to the east of us. We hear engines all the time, helicopters are flying, and now their artillery

is shelling us from there. This evening after dinner we were bombarded with 120-mm mortars. At 17:00 our first battalion was engaged in heavy fighting. So far the results are unknown.

26 November 1987

Last night I was woken up by the earth rumbling. It was easy to feel and hear it because we sleep on the ground under the armoured personnel carrier. Evidently it was the enemy's armed column on the move.

From 12:00 the enemy launched a powerful bombardment with its 106.7-mm recoilless guns. The fire was directed at the 1st and 2nd battalions of our brigade. Luckily for them, they'd already moved to the next line of defence.

Around 15:00 the chief of the 59th brigade, on our right, informed the military district command that the enemy column had revealed itself right next to them on his right flank. He confirmed the presence of enemy armoured personnel carriers and infantry. The brigade began firing at this column with everything they had.

Over the radio we heard that the UN had taken a resolution obliging South Africa to withdraw all its troops from Angola by 10 December. We think the South Africans will heap scorn on this resolution even though the UN secretary-general himself is expected to come to Angola in order to supervise the withdrawal of the South African troops. Then we stumbled upon a transmission from South Africa where they were broadcasting the reply of Roelof [Pik] Botha, their minister of foreign affairs. The gist was that South Africa wouldn't permit the extension of communism in southern Africa, would attend to its own security interests, and would withdraw its troops from Angola only after the withdrawal of the Cubans and Russians.

This evening, the brigade commander arrived and said he'd received a telegram indicating that the present operation will end on 26 November, today, and that this was allegedly an order from the minister of defence. Well, I don't know how and who it's for, but for us it still has yet to end – the devil knows when.

Today a telegram was sent to the military district command with a request for my replacement. I have not been able to shake off the

consequences of the concussion incurred on 1 November, when we were blasted by a shell from a 155-mm howitzer. My right ear hurts, my left shoulder has clearly been dislocated and my headaches and dizziness have become more frequent. The first time I injured this aching left shoulder was on 29 October, but by the following day everything was already back to normal. But on 1 November I must have been hit by something hard at the time of the explosion and evidently dislocated it.

27 November 1987

Today differs little from previous days. As usual, they bombarded us and also the brigades next to us. On Soviet radio, there is a deathly silence about Angola. We try to catch this news every day and we get nothing.

The enemy continues to bombard Cuito. At 18:00 he fired salvoes from his Kentrons. I was in contact with Cuito just then, and for a long time I couldn't reach anybody. Finally they told me that the shells had exploded right on top of the Soviet mission. So far, they have not communicated any news of the effects.

28 November 1987

All night and this morning, there was an exhausting, protracted silence – not a shot to be heard, no sounds of an engine – nothing. And we couldn't fall sleep because of it. Anyway we were very agitated, not knowing what was happening in Cuito.

At 06:00 we learnt that as a result of the bombardment, Col. Andrei Gorb, a transport officer already advanced in years, a very calm, good and accommodating person, has died. Usually, they say, one does not speak evil of the dead. About him and about his life, we can only say good things. Everyone respectfully called him Uncle. He had spent just a year in Angola. How all this happened, we don't know. We know this one thing: a very good man left our lines. As the verse of Vysotsky²⁷ says: "Death selects the best and pulls them out one by one."

Telegram 156 – to Cuito

28.11.1987 – 15:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

1. Received: 10 spades, 50 anti-tank mines, 250 anti-personnel mines.
2. At 12:30 in the area 62° – 16 km a company of the 1st infantry battalion faced ambush during reconnaissance operation. No losses. Ammunition consumption: M-82 mortar – 16, Grad-P – 7 [portable rocket tube].
3. At 08:00 our command post came under fire from 81-mm mortar from the area 6° – 13 km.
4. We organised all kinds of reconnaissance, patrols, ambushes, observation posts. Very few military personnel in our sub-units.
5. We install minefields ahead of front line in directions of probable enemy tank attacks.
6. Tomorrow food supplies in our brigade will be depleted.

Brigade Commander Adviser

29 November 1987

Today at 08:00 in the morning, our brigade commander says, a group of the enemy based near the defence positions of our 1st battalion ran into our ambush; or perhaps FAPLA ran into an enemy ambush. In any case, it was a serious battle. One of our men was wounded, two were declared missing and one sub-machine-gun was lost. The fate of the two missing soldiers is unknown – whether they deserted or were killed.

Telegram 157 – to Cuito

29.11.1987 – 08:20

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

1. Morale low – many junior sub-unit commanders killed.
Attack by UNITA can be repulsed but if RSA sub-units attack,

Angolans will leave everything at once and run away.

2. Trenches are dug – four lines in 2–3 km. Block obstacles are installed as anti-tank and anti-personnel mines are located at dangerous positions. Big undertaking to cut firing areas in front of the first defence line. We have very few military personnel in sub-units.
3. Counterattack lines are constructed with tanks up to the first defence line of the battalions.
4. Artillery: BM-21 [multiple rocket launcher] – one, for Grad-1P [one-shot rocket tube] – two to three firing positions are prepared. The enemy's defeat at lines of fire is planned. We have very little anti-tank means.
5. Suggestions: 1. Man the brigade according to requirements; 2. Conduct execution for panic flight, desertion, etc. 3. Introduce a system of rewards. 4. Timely provision of MTM to the brigade. 5. I believe that two brigades at full strength will defend the area between Cuatir and Shambinga rivers successfully.

Brigade Commander Adviser

Telegram 158 – to Cuito

29.11.1987 – 08:30

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

According to the Angolan line the operation is already over. Till 30 November, orders are to deliver reports about the last stage of operation. What about us?

Brigade Commander Adviser

Telegram 159 – to Cuito

29.11.1987 – 17:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

- 1) We installed 36 anti-tank mines and 72 anti-personnel mines in the line 45° for 15 km, 62° for 11.5 km in dangerous positions.
- 2) We started digging trenches ahead of the front line and in front of the minefield at the distance 250–400 m, where our front outposts will be located. Overall there will be 4 trench lines ready at all the defensive depths.
- 3) At night vehicle movement was heard from the direction of the Shaminga River.
- 4) At 08:00 an enemy group got ambushed at the Cuatir River head. No losses on our part.

Brigade Commander Adviser

Telegram 160 – to Cuito

29.11.1987 – 18:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

I report once again.

Reconnaissance groups do not venture beyond 3–4 km from our front line. They are afraid and lie in every possible way, doing anything not to go out. To collect data on the enemy, it is only possible to do reconnaissance by battalion strength now.

Brigade Commander Adviser

30 November 1987

Night passed quietly. Our technician Sasha Fatyanov and I left our usual sleeping place under the armoured troop carrier and went to sleep in our new dugout, acquiring, so to speak, a new home. It's large and spacious enough, and we'd made the roof with three layers, covered the walls with

sticks, built bunks and put mattresses on them, and hung up mosquito nets. Terrific!

At 06:00 our brigade commander dispatched 60 men under the command of the 1st battalion chief to search for the two missing men, check the area once more, and set up an ambush there.

They returned this evening having found nothing, but they had set the ambush. Our reconnaissance constantly reports the movement of columns of motor vehicles of the enemy from the sources of the Ube and Shambinga rivers to the source of the Cuatir and also flights of their helicopters. What are they preparing there? Around evening a heavy rain began, after lighter rain all day.

Telegram 161 – to Cuito

30.11.1987 – 17:30

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

1. 1st infantry battalion covered up to 5 km to the east, left ambush (up to one company) at the area 62° – 16 km and came back.
2. MTM availability. No food supplies. Medical supplies – 76.
Diesel – 8700 litres. Oil: 30–130 litres, 50–200 litres.
Military personnel: officers – 96, sergeants – 96, soldiers – 715, total – 907.

Brigade Commander Adviser

1 December 1987

The big rain which began yesterday evening persisted all night. Our dugout leaked and at 03:00 water began to trickle right into our beds, or more accurately, between them. We put a bucket on the floor and moved the beds apart as much as possible. The rain continued on and off the entire day. The wet season has begun.

Today is the first of December, which means the beginning of winter in the USSR, but here it's summer. In fact, it doesn't bring any change whatever! Here we've lost count of the days. We have been rushing about

the forests for almost two months and it no longer makes any difference to us whether it's Wednesday or Thursday. Well, on Sunday we wash ourselves and do our laundry, but in fact it's just another day.

Yesterday we got a telegram with instructions to prepare a helipad for our helicopters. At first we supposed that the high command might be planning a visit. But today I found out that the landing strip is needed to supply us with food.

This evening our 25th brigade reported that from 16:00 to 17:30 the enemy had bombarded their command post with 155-mm guns and at 19:00 they heard a helicopter in the area around the source of the Ube River.

2 December 1987

Telegram 164 – to Cuito

02.12.1987 – 12:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

1. Reconnaissance group No. 1 is operating on the right bank of the Cuatir River, 5–6 km from the river.
2. All reconnaissance units to the east meet ambushes and enemy units. They cannot go beyond 4–5 km from the front line. Continuous movement is heard from the direction of the Cunzumbia and Shaminga rivers.
3. There was no order to send cars for food supplies.
4. How is the repair of the evacuated artillery, tanks, etc., progressing? When will they be sent to the brigade, as well as the recovered wounded?

Brigade Commander Adviser

Today at 15:00 a commission headed by a major of the FAPLA general staff arrived to assess the situation and check our defences. The chiefs of the military district services came too.

First there was the report of the brigade commander and his decision

on the defensive combat order formation. Tomorrow we'll visit the defensive battle areas of our battalions.

This commission has been to the 25th and 59th brigades next to us. Apparently the South Africans had already tried to breach the defensive positions, but the brigades were able to beat them back. The 59th brigade destroyed two AML-90 armoured personnel carriers, while the 25th inflicted heavy losses on the enemy.

3 December 1987

Today, from morning to lunch, we accompanied the commission along the defensive positions. The defects were revealed, and their causes too.

At 14:00 we had a meeting on the commission's findings. The chiefs of the district services presented their reports. But before the commission's summary we heard by radio about a press conference in Luanda, set up for Angolan and foreign journalists. At that press conference the very same UNITA captain whom our brigade had taken prisoner on the river Ube on 16 November appeared. As I've already mentioned, he had been in charge of supplies for all the South African units in our area. He said much of interest about the activities of the South Africans against the 16th brigade, tactical group, and us in the 21st brigade. He said a South African colonel who was a pilot instructor, one of the South African aces, had died in one of the planes shot down by the Angolans.

Here I end my diary. For the moment it is quiet and our brigade is in its positions in the forest, but we are awaiting a possible enemy attack. We have no idea what will happen next. We haven't received any letters from home in six weeks.

Telegram 185 – to Cuito

13.12.1987 – 10:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

1. Judging by reports of the reconnaissance group, there is an enemy base at the Sita River head as there are many trails and pathways heading in that direction.
2. Reconnaissance groups are scared to go to the areas specified

to them, lying and dodging in all possible ways, all categories included.

3. Instructing, showing and then requiring the Angolans to make a diagram of platoon, company, battalion, defence regions and compile required defence papers starting from platoon and finishing with brigade, I meet unwillingness everywhere, only problems: no maps, no paper, etc., beginning with the brigade commander down to the rest.
4. A competent and strict control committee is required to draw up specific instructions about removing from posts, taking to court for not fulfilling orders. We equip a new command post at the area 10° – 9 km.
5. Two men got blown up by our own anti-personnel mines; evacuated to Cuito Cuanavale.
6. We prepare to conduct classes on defence with battalion commanders and company leaders on 14 December.

Brigade Commander Adviser

Telegram 186 – to Cuito

13.12.1987 – 16:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

There was artillery and mortar fire from 11 to 12. Projectiles fired by South Africans from approximately 10 155-mm guns and 20 M-81 ones.

Brigade Commander Adviser

Telegram 187 – to Cuito

14.12.1987 – 10:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

Lt.-Col. Khramov arrived [a new adviser to the brigade commander]. I delegated my authority to him. I plan to arrive at Cuito Cuanavale when opportunity arises.

Personnel before the campaign began:

officers – 123, sergeants – 163, soldiers – 1044. Total – 1330.

Personnel from 20.11.1987:

officers – 96, sergeants – 93, soldiers – 716. Total – 914.

Brigade Commander Adviser

Telegram 191 – to Cuito

15.12.1987 – 08:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

- 1) On 14 December the 2nd battalion joined battle at the line 52° – 14 km from the point 891 against UNITA troops (up to two companies). After the battle the 2nd battalion was directed to the east. FAPLA losses: one killed, eight wounded.
- 2) The enemy conducted systematic bombardment by 81-mm mortar against our battalion defence lines (51 bombs fired). FAPLA losses: four wounded.
- 3) From 08:40 to 09:30 the enemy conducted bombardment by 155-mm guns against our brigade command post (37 projectiles fired).

Brigade Commander Adviser

Telegram 195 – to Cuito

17.12.1987 – 06.00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

State of health of our interpreter Igor Zhdarkin is satisfactory, but his left collarbone needs medical examination and treatment. We have no substitute. As soon as you can, send us a new interpreter.

Brigade Commander Adviser

Telegram 198 – to Cuito

20.12.1987 – 18:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

Artillery bombardment from 16:00 to 16:30. Enemy used cassette-type projectile – during explosion of one projectile there were from four to six bursts.

Brigade Commander Adviser

Telegram 207 – to Cuito

25.12.1987 – 12:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

1. At 08:00 the enemy sent holiday greetings to us (Catholic Christmas) by means of 8 artillery rounds against the command post of our brigade. One (Angolan) officer was wounded.
2. Request clearance to leave for Cuito Cuanavale by BTR [APC] for rotation [one shift replacing another].

Brigade Commander Adviser

Telegram 208 – to Cuito

25.12.1987 – 19:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

From 17:00 to 18:00 the enemy continued artillery bombardment having already launched 85 projectiles. As a whole, 120 projectiles were fired against our brigade today. We specify the results of that bombardment.

Brigade Commander Adviser

Telegram 210 – to Cuito

26.12.1987 – 09:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

1. The brigade commander shows no initiative in conducting the reconnaissance in force by one battalion. His reasons: 1. They need food rations for the reconnaissance unit; 2. The brigade has a reserve of food supplies only up to 30 December; 3. He does not have any orders from higher command to perform such actions.
2. My opinion: Reconnaissance in force by means of one reinforced battalion under the command of one of the deputy brigade commanders should be conducted in the following direction: from our brigade defence area directly to the east for the distance of the brigade artillery support (up to 20 km), then turn to the north, reaching the head of the Sita River, follow its right bank up to its confluence with the Cuanavale River, and then return back following that route. The task is for 6 days. Following this route it will be necessary to leave ambushes, because the enemy will track our battalion everywhere.

Brigade Commander Adviser

Telegram 212 – to Cuito

26.12.1987 – 15:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

- 1) The enemy fired 97 projectiles from their 155-mm guns against our brigade.
- 2) Our consumption of ammunition (against the enemy): BM-21 – 24 projectiles, M-82 – 47 mines, ZU-23-2 – 373 shots.
- 3) As a result of yesterday's bombardment we [Soviet advisers] have shell damage in everything: our APC turret, all kitchen utensils, crockery, and the table, water barrels, canvas, cloth

(tarpaulin) and so on.

- 5) Confirm your clearance for rotation of our group to Cuito Cuanavale by APC.

Brigade Commander Adviser

Telegram 213 – to Cuito

27.12.1987 – 06:00

To the Adviser of the Military District Commander

At 17:00 on 26 December there was an air strike against the defence of our brigade.

Since 17:30 the enemy continued artillery bombardment by 155-mm guns, 13 projectiles fired.

Brigade Commander Adviser

* * *

Valeriy Vasilevich!

Please, this notebook is only meant for your eyes. Don't show it to anyone else, in particular to my mom. Valentin Matveychik is to give you a letter along with this notebook.

As for me, so far everything is normal, if you do not count my concussion and dislocated shoulder. But that will pass in any case. Please tell everyone that I'm in Menongue because the conditions here leave much to be desired. Well, Valentin will tell you everything. Still another request: get a cheque from my mom and buy me one of those small tape recorders, like the one I had that broke down. All for now.

Goodbye. Regards to everyone.

Igor

Appendices in Igor Zhdarkin's notebook

Song by Igor Zhdarkin in Cuito Cuanavale, December 1987

Cuito, Lomba – that's where we fought,
 Often risking our lives.
 The shells were flying, the mines exploding ...
 for us it was dangerous but we were not afraid.
 We knew only one thing – we had to survive,
 for all of us to return home, to embrace our loved ones.
 We believed that there we are awaited and loved,
 and that if something was to happen, we would not be forgotten.
 UNITA cut into us, to our left and to our right,
 And don't turn, here's a pit, there's a ditch.
 And the planes from South Africa flew
 And dropped bombs over our heads.

Losses of the 21st infantry brigade during the operation (data at 18 December 1987)

	Officers	NCOs	Soldiers	Total
Killed	15	13	107	135
Wounded	55	50	365	469
Missing	2	4	19	25
Deserted	2	15	95	112

UNITA losses

	Officers	NCOs	Soldiers	Total
Killed	10	1	42	53
Wounded	50	–	118	168

Four prisoners were captured, including a captain in charge of supplying the rear of the South African group in Cuando Cubango province.

Enemy forces (South African and UNITA) on the territory of the 6th military district, Cuando Cubango Province

On the southern border of the Angolan Cuando Cubango Province are concentrated 30 000 South African military personnel, 400 artillery pieces of different calibres, 80 planes, and the 8th tank division.

In Cuando Cubango Province and around the town of Cuito Cuanavale the active forces are a motorised South African brigade, the 61st and 62nd South African battalions, the 32nd battalion of the “Buffalo” bandit mercenaries [in a battalion, there are 12 companies, each with 100 soldiers], 4th regular UNITA battalion, 5th regular UNITA battalion, 18th, 118th and 275th battalions of UNITA with 450 men in each.

Soviet military advisers and specialists lost in the 6th military district, July–December 1987

July: An adviser to the commander of the 59th brigade approached a mine and his foot was blown to pieces (July).

26 September: Oleg Snitko, the interpreter of the 21st infantry brigade, died. Wounded were: Khramov, adviser to the brigade commander; Aragelyan, adviser to the brigade chief political officer; and Deykin, adviser to the battalion commander.

1 November: Artiomenko, adviser to the brigade commander of the 21st infantry brigade, and the interpreter Zhdarkin were concussed.

26 November: Col. A.I. Gorb was mortally wounded in the Valkiri bombardment of Cuito Cuanavale.

29 October: Six advisers and specialists of the 59th infantry brigade suffered from poison gas at the Miane River.

4 December: A.T. Gorbach, adviser to the 59th infantry brigade commander, was wounded from shelling. Two others suffered from concussion.

19 December: Lt.-Col. Kuptsov, adviser to the commander of the district political administration, was seriously wounded in a bombardment at Cuito (his foot was blown to pieces).

Igor Zhdarkin Looks Back

Preparing for the unknown

Training and preparation for service in Angola was a very important (and sometimes awkward) time for us. Men were chosen, it would seem, from all parts of the former Soviet Union, from Kaliningrad and Murmansk to Kushka, and Kamchatka and the Kuril Islands.

Orders were sent to each region indicating that a certain number of men were needed for service missions in this or that country. At that time, there were many countries where our specialists served. Simply, what was needed was a given number of specialists – artillerymen, staff officers, infantry, interpreters and so on – because their knowledge would be important in assisting those countries.

The selection was a careful, painstaking process. It was organised in several phases, beginning with choosing candidates in their military districts. The last step was final selection for service missions by the general staff in Moscow.

One must give our general staff its due because they made serious attempts to prepare people adequately for service in tropical countries. Naturally they tried to take people who were in a satisfactory physical condition because, as everyone knew, service in such countries wasn't a piece of cake. Usually there were all sorts of diseases present, not to mention war! The diseases in question were very varied, like malaria, yellow fever, hepatitis, amoebic dysentery – too many to spell out, especially if you go through the entire list – and people had to be inoculated against them all.

Above all, what had to be taken into consideration was the hot and humid climate. There are seasons over there that are completely unknown to us in Russia. In fact, the general staff organised lectures about this. For example, people who went to Angola were informed through lectures that Angola is situated in the southern hemisphere, bordering with Namibia, Zambia and other countries, obtained its independence in 1975, the population is such-and-such, the official language is Portuguese, and all that.

But it should be pointed out that, despite all these serious efforts to prepare the candidates, those who went to Angola somehow still didn't have the information they needed. I realised this as soon as I found myself in that country. To know only that Angola is situated in the southern hemisphere and is washed by such and such an ocean – these are just the most ordinary and widely known concepts. Surely you also had to know the traditions and the customs of the people and how they generally view themselves? For example, what type of person is an Angolan? How does he feel in his country and how does he conceptualise reality? They don't think as we do at all, that is to say, not in the way we've become accustomed to. And with that gap of understanding, mistakes happened. Not only on our Soviet side, of course – these mistakes were also made by the British and Americans and French and Belgians and others.

This was because everybody tried to construct everything in their own image and fashion. "Oh, we live in France, don't we! So you people will also live as in France, like us!" And the Soviets did the same sort of thing in Angola – after all, we reasoned, we know the Soviet system, and the Soviet people and community. We sought to recreate in Angola exactly the same surroundings as we had at home in order for things to turn out well over there. Our attitude was: "You've become a socialist state, now you must also become whatever else we advise you to be."

The way things worked out was that high-level specialists in the field who had long studied the country and investigated its traditions and customs in detail were able to advise our general secretary or the ministry of foreign affairs how to proceed, so that everything was clearly understood. But just imagine a simple officer, an artilleryman, a paratrooper, who is doing his

military service somewhere in Siberia and suddenly he's transferred to Angola. What does he know about the Angolan people? It's not his fault that he knows practically nothing about them. What does it really mean to him if something incomprehensible is mentioned about the country? At that moment it's very likely he won't even be able to find this nation on a map. Where is this Angola or Algeria or anywhere else, for that matter?

And lo and behold, he arrives in Angola – and he begins to think of these Angolans as if they were our own ordinary Soviet soldiers. For him Soviet soldiers are the norm, everything works because this type of soldier speaks Russian and understands everything. And he shares a similar ideology and lifestyle, and so on. But of course, over there in Angola, everything is completely different.

And yet I must add that the Angolans related very well to our interpreters for the very reason that the interpreters knew the language, the customs and traditions of the country they worked in. So the Angolans found it was easy to talk with the interpreters about the things interesting to Angolans, and simply about life itself.

Likewise, the same Angolans greatly respected those of our advisers and specialists who were not only the experts – 'good working men' – but could speak Portuguese. In whatever way and however little they were able to communicate with these Angolans, it made a marked difference to the relationships between them if they could speak some Portuguese.

As to the understanding of local traditions and personal relations – the most important means of achieving this knowledge was familiarity with the local language. Anyone who didn't know the language felt themselves just horribly alone abroad. But I can say of our advisers and specialists, the great majority of them were reasonably fluent in Portuguese by the end of their stay, at least enough to meet the requirements of their work. At least they could work sometimes without interpreters and were able to explain to the Angolans what they wanted them to do. On the other hand, for serious and major items of communication, the interpreter was simply indispensable.

But once again, let me say that the Angolans treated our specialists and advisers with respect. The Angolans understood – after all, they were



Africa Institute Moscow

MPLA combatants and BRDM-2 (amphibious armoured patrol car), central Angola, 1976.



Africa Institute Moscow

Fidel Castro visited Angola in 1977. Here he attends an outdoor information meeting on the Battle of Quifangondo, which took place in 1975.



Africa Institute Moscow

Soviet military advisers, dressed in Cuban uniform, with military hardware – an anti-tank guided missile system (ATGM, Nato codename ‘Malytka’ (‘Sagger’)) – on display in Luanda, 1976.



Africa Institute Moscow

After the South African raid on Cassinga: a destroyed and burnt-out ZIL-131 truck, 4 May 1978.



Africa Institute Moscow

A Cuban column, sent from Techamutete to rescue refugees in Cassinga, was wiped out by the South African Air Force. Pictured here is a destroyed BTR-60PB armoured personnel carrier, 4 May 1978.



Africa Institute Moscow

Cuban GAZ-66 truck destroyed by the South African Air Force near Cassinga, 4 May 1978.



Africa Institute Moscow

The An-12 in the background would carry these district advisers back to their posts after a seminar in Huambo, 1978. In the centre is Col. V.A. Varganov.



Africa Institute Moscow

Cuban fighter pilot, Captain Alberto Lei, in his MiG-23 with a Soviet technician at Minongue airbase, 1988.



Africa Institute Moscow

The road to Cuito Cuanavale, 1987.



Africa Institute Moscow

The town of Cuito Cuanavale, 1987.



Africa Institute Moscow

Soviet advisers and specialists of the 21st brigade on an APC (BTR-60PB) at the start of a combat operation, Cuito Cuanavale, 1987.



Africa Institute Moscow

Angolan personnel and Soviet advisers on the temporary bridge at Cuito Cuanavale, 1987.



UNITA artillery spotter captured near Cuito Cuanavale, 1987.



Africa Institute Moscow

Igor Zhdarkin in the trenches at Cuito Cuanavale, 1988.



Africa Institute Moscow

Gen. Vassily Shakhnovich, who commanded Soviet personnel in Angola from 1977 to 1980.



Africa Institute Moscow

Lt. Zhdarkin (left), Lt.-Col. Sushchenko (centre) and the legendary FAPLA commander, N'Geleka, at the front lines of Cuito Cuanavale, 1988.



Africa Institute Moscow

Soviet advisers and the crew of the Pechora anti-aircraft missile system at Cuito Cunavale, 1988.



Africa Institute Moscow

Cuban medal parade at Cuito Cunavale, 1988.



Africa Institute Moscow

Lt. Zhdarkin with a captured G3 assault rifle and Cuban comrades in front of a captured Olifant tank, Cuito Cuanavale, 1988.



Africa Institute Moscow

Cuban combatants inspecting a captured South African Olifant tank at Cuito Cuanavale, 1988.



Cuban Military Archives

Many Cuban women volunteers, like the group above, served as anti-aircraft gunners in Angola.



Cuban Military Archives



Africa Institute Moscow

Female Cuban volunteers in Angola. The gunners in the top photograph have just received campaign medals.



Cuban Military Archives

Soviet helicopters (the Mi-8) above an advancing line of FAPLA infantry and Cuban advisers, August 1983.



Cuban Military Archives

Cuban instructors with FAPLA recruits and a Soviet ZPU-4 heavy machine gun, 1985.



Africa Institute Moscow

Lt. Vyacheslav Anatoliyevich Barabulya and Angolan crew members of a D-30 howitzer, 1988.



Africa Institute Moscow

Captured SADF materiel, Cahama, 1988. (Note Unimog with mortar on left, Samil-20 trucks and adviser with R4 assault rifle on right.)



Captured SADF Casspir vehicle, Cahama, 1988.

Africa Institute Moscow



Military advisers of the 2nd infantry brigade, at Cahama, 1988. Lt. Korolkov is on the far right.

Africa Institute Moscow

not blind – that our advisers and specialists knew what it was all about and also could explain themselves in Portuguese to anybody. In fact, this raised their image. I knew more than ten of our specialists who spoke Portuguese fluently. However much they mixed up their declensions and conjugations, they were basically fluent.

Why have I lingered so long on this topic? Because when we arrived in Angola, we met fellow interpreters who'd already been in Angola for one or two years and we were treated to several evenings devoted to the "clarification of the international situation", as they put it jokingly. We drank beer or lemonade and enjoyed a typical evening party. And we got to know what we would have to do in this country.

The most important thing was healthy contact between an interpreter and the local population, because without that – and of course contact with the Angolan military too – nothing was possible. It was vital for the interpreter to gain the respect of the Angolans he interacted with. With that, he could iron out any tight situations or unpleasant moments. And such moments could occur from time to time, especially during a war.

First of all, these situations arose through our well-known Russian swearwords. Many Angolans knew them either because they'd picked them up while studying in the Soviet Union or because the Soviets had taught them these words during local training. But then, to make things worse, they knew the literal meaning of our foul curses and this sometimes led to conflict.

I was involved in a case where an adviser arrived at work, summoned the Angolan head of the operations department and began yelling at him because no maps were compiled as ordered. I translated this to the best of my ability, emphasising to the Angolan that he was in the wrong, that he was a scoundrel and a good-for-nothing. It was perfectly clear what the adviser thought of him, from all the swearwords. I did my best to make the point politely, while the literal message was "Curl yourself up with your own prick" and "Fuck your mother." The Angolan leapt up in rage, shouting, "You don't have to disturb my mother, she's already dead!" and ran off. It just so happened that a piece of black cloth fastened to his uniform indicated that he was in mourning – his mother had indeed

recently died – and he knew word for word the meaning of “Fuck your mother.”

The adviser asked me what he was saying and I told him he’d offended the Angolan because his mother had just recently died. He said in surprise, “What mother? Is there a mother in this somewhere?” Well, of course he hadn’t even noticed it was his actual words that had produced the insult. And as a result the interpreter was blamed, as usual: Igor hadn’t translated something correctly.

But we did often find that Russian swearwords helped when we were short of Portuguese words, even though there were really only five words available that could be combined in different ways. The Angolans understood them all as our advisers and specialists socialised well with them. Combinations of those words together with some Portuguese terms could somehow get the message across.

A few of our senior officers simply never understood about this kind of communication. A classic case was when Col. Mishchenko observed a Soviet warrant officer giving a task to an Angolan soldier [in Cuito Cuanavale in 1988]. Since our warrant officer didn’t speak Portuguese very well, he described the job in a mixture of foul Russian and Portuguese. In other words, in the usual sort of way. The Angolan nodded his assent – yes, all is normal, he has no further questions and understands everything.

Well, Mishchenko runs up to the warrant officer and cries, “How can you do this? How dare you speak in this manner to our Angolan brother?” The warrant officer snaps to attention, very surprised, and the Angolan does the same, saying that everything is normal – he was told quite clearly what he had to do. Wasn’t this correct? All that remained was that he just had to go and do it. As the Angolan saw it, he was about to carry out his duties when some bespectacled colonel ran up and began to shout something.

Next day there was the obligatory daily morning political briefing dealing with the situation in Angola and the world at large. As Mishchenko was present, he naturally took over the proceedings. He declared, “Some of our comrades still have not fully realised the seriousness of the situation. They use foul language with our Angolan brothers.”

An inquiring voice was heard from the back of the hall: “But how else can one talk to them?”

Mishchenko exploded. “Who said this? How dare you!”

To us this was a lot of gibberish. The point is not whether or not the Angolans are our brothers, but we’re fighting together against a common enemy, all working together and fulfilling common tasks, not according to nationality or race. If you’ve received a task, accept it!

We had to get physically tough with the Angolans too. The interpreters who had served in Angola for a long time would tell us [in 1986], “Guys, first of all, if you notice a conflict starting up between Soviets and Angolans, it’s basically because our advisers and specialists sometimes beat up the Angolans – a jab here, a kick there – so put that in your pipe and smoke it! But you can only join in after you’ve verbally abused the Angolan yourselves.”

Well, this meant we had to show the Angolan from the start that he was wrong. As we interpreters knew the language, we could do this. “You’re wrong! They told you to do it and you didn’t. They told you again and you still didn’t. They asked you again and again. You are a good-for-nothing! A son of a bitch, a piece of shit ...” And only after he’s realised that he was really in the wrong, that he *is* a son of a bitch and a shit, may he be beaten up – *but only where it’s really necessary*.

Our advisers sometimes moved to the next instruction too fast. Not explaining requirements to the Angolan in enough detail, yelling at him in Russian (obviously something he couldn’t understand, he’d only hear the terms of abuse). And after this the jabs, the socks on the jaw, began. Of course, immediately after, the Angolan complaints also began – that this or that adviser conducted himself in this or that unacceptable way, and so on, and so forth. One must try to avoid this under all circumstances.

What interested me especially was that one of the Angolans themselves confirmed all this to me in my first year in Angola. A battalion commander told me: “It’s necessary from the start to convince our soldiers that they’re only scum and good-for-nothings, and only after this has been achieved should they be beaten.”

Surprised, I asked him: “Do you beat up your soldiers?”

His reply was: "But what should I do with them otherwise? They're just a bunch of pigs. You give them an order and they don't carry it out. Well, give them some 'political training' – they love that – and give them some political consciousness by making them aware that they are shit. Insist that you gave him a task and he didn't complete it or he did it badly or something else of this kind ... only then can you hit him in the face."

This came from that officer, so I'm not inventing anything. That's how things were. I want to emphasise that this was a highly illuminating moment for me, especially being new to the country and not yet used to such things. Without insight, conflicts can really break out and in the most varied ways.

Our task was not only to operate some kind of machine or write a staff report. Most Angolans simply wanted to know what the specialist, adviser or interpreter was thinking about an issue. It was purely a question of human contact, that's the important point. I might add, many advisers and specialists failed to pick up just such moments during their stay in Angola. They did everything correctly, helped the Angolans in their work and struggle, and honestly fulfilled their duties; but, generally not being into the peculiarities of the Angolan mentality, they often found it very difficult to obtain results.

And this affected their work experience – all the more so as our advisers and specialists got such different training from the interpreters. We interpreters, studying at the Military Institute of Foreign Languages, not only learnt Portuguese or Persian or some other language but also had specialised training on regional military matters. This was a significant subject, including military geography and analysis of international affairs, plus traditions, customs, history of the state, what the state represents, and how to conduct oneself in that state. And the vital point, we were taught both the language and regional military studies by people who'd already served a number of tours in the country we were going to. The experience of someone who's been there, done that, is the best form of instruction. No adviser or specialist could acquire this insight, whereas the interpreters arrived more or less prepared. Right away we were able to grasp a lot of things about the country. Mind you, we still had a lot to learn, and we did

learn a lot more during our time in Angola.

The Angolans very soon got the hang of our system of complaints. Complaints were made if, for example, they did not like the adviser or if his requirements were too demanding; there were in fact some of our advisers who were really eager to make improvements, and so naturally began to make extra demands on those Angolans. In such cases, immediate complaints were made (through their own chain of command) that this specific adviser or specialist was a good-for-nothing, a bastard and a shit. They loved to accuse him of drinking vodka in working hours – although the fellow might be suffering from kidney or liver disease and in reality could not drink. If he drinks vodka he must be replaced.

And our command believed this unreservedly. They'd send for him and tear him to bits at a party or trade union meeting. It never got as far as expulsion, of course, or almost never. Though if there was a completely scandalous case – such as killing a child in an irresponsible vehicle accident or smashing a pile of cars during a drinking bout – then he'd be sent back to the Soviet Union within 24 hours without further ado.

First impressions of Angola

We came to Angola, the three of us – Piotr Ivanovsky, Slava Barabulya and I. We were all junior lieutenants who'd arrived by plane on 1 August 1986. Of course, at first we were afraid of flying. Still, it was our first time in a foreign state. And what a foreign state Angola turned out to be – in no way like France, Britain or the USA!

And when we landed our first impressions stunned us, completely unlike what we were used to at home, sometimes even different from what we had been told about this country. First of all, when we got to the Fourth of February Airport we saw this red earth, reddish-brown and dark brown earth, covered with unbelievably twisted pieces of cars and spare parts, scraps of paper and debris. Just a lot of shit – you can't call it by any other word.

Then, to leave the plane, they brought along a gangway. The ladder was rusty and unbelievably dirty. We stepped down and onto a bus that took us to the airport building. I came out of the plane with a bag and decided

against putting it down on the floor of the bus. I put it on my feet. I didn't even want to hold on to the handrails of the bus. Instead, Slava and I simply held on to Piotr Ivanovsky, and that's how we reached the airport building.

There I was somewhat shocked to find a filthy floor occupied by dirty, ragged women and children sitting everywhere. There were trunks, some bags and, in general, the-devil-knows-what all around. We somehow avoided this mess and went to the conveyor belt that was dispensing our baggage (I felt a little squeamish thinking of my suitcase travelling on this grimy conveyor belt). As the belt moved, we frantically snatched our luggage away in order to get it off as soon as possible.

Thank God our people from the Soviet mission arrived in a bus to collect our group. They were of course expecting our arrival, and we set off on the Luanda road. This was itself something to behold! There was some sort of asphalt surface with many holes and along the sides of the main road a foul, awful-looking wall, garbage-filled dumps and puddles on the ground with something or other lying in them. Ragged, dirty people were walking around everywhere – nothing but desolation.

For the first two weeks we were with Piotr Ivanovsky just outside Luanda in a commando training centre. Slava Barabulya left us on the third day and flew to the north of the country, to the province of Uíge.

At our military institute we'd learnt literary Portuguese, but most Angolans speak *Calão*, a pidgin version that's very different from the official language. But in the end we also managed to understand and communicate in it.

The other thing is, when an Angolan first speaks out freely you have to grasp the basic concept of what he is trying to say and then translate all the words. He can talk about whatever he likes, beginning with the struggle against colonialism or about the exploration of Angola, and then he'd ask for a cigarette. He'd say how he fought in guerrilla detachments, how things were tough in Angola, how the Soviet Union helped them and so forth (this was something they learnt to chatter about as our deputy commanders for political affairs tried their best to encourage it). So actually, at first, it was a little bit difficult. The Angolan would approach

and begin to say something. Right away our specialist would ask: "What does he want?" You begin to translate this gibberish. Our specialist stands up, looks blank and hasn't a clue what this is all about. And then it turns out the Angolan was just asking for a cigarette.

Well, there were many such moments in the commando training centre near Luanda, where we helped to prepare military training programmes for the Angolans (rifle practice, driving vehicles and so on). And please excuse me, but also the simple necessities: "Where do we urinate?" I asked the Angolans when I needed a toilet. The answer to this was: "Please go wherever you want." The whole bloody country's a toilet! I was shocked.

So we worked there for two weeks. When we finally finished that job, the most senior interpreter told us: "Well, I am sending you, Slava, to the far south. Piotr Ivanovsky, you will join the 19th brigade at Mulondo. As for you, Igor, you will serve in the Kvadrat air defence unit attached to this brigade." So we flew away to the south.

We went to Lubango in the centre of Huila Province, where we were met at the airport and taken to the Soviet mission. The surroundings were very beautiful – a basin between the hills. The climate was good. We were on a plateau. It wasn't cold in winter. July and August were winter for them, with the same temperature as ours at that time, while summers there were not very hot. This was because Lubango and its surroundings were high up, at an altitude of over 1700 metres. Of course, the climate was not the same throughout the entire province because literally only 100 km from Lubango it was entirely different.

Our 19th brigade was based on the banks of the Cunene River, one of the largest rivers in Angola. Interestingly, during the Second World War a sanatorium for Fascist airmen was operating in this town of Lubango. The pilots might have been from Rommel's Afrika Korps. Portugal was, although neutral, a Fascist state because Salazar ruled there as Franco did in Spain. In any case, Portugal offered its territory and bases to the Germans, and the Fascist pilots spent their leave there.

Lubango was still a relatively clean little town when we arrived, eleven years after independence. Of course, things there were not what they'd been under the Portuguese and relative cleanliness was the only visible

trace of the former system. It had worked at the expense of blacks, of course. Under Portuguese-style apartheid, the blacks washed the asphalt and the sidewalks with brush and soap. Moreover, they were allowed into the town only between five and six in the morning, when they cleaned and swept these asphalt-covered sidewalks. After completing their tasks, they would be obliged to leave.

At that time Angola was a place of rest both for the Portuguese themselves and for tourists from various European countries. The Portuguese used their colonies for their own pleasure. Unlike the English, French, Spanish and Belgians, they basically developed only extractive and manufacturing industries in their colonies while using these places for their own amusement. A Portuguese would live on his estate somewhere far away. He'd get sick and tired of flying in a helicopter and so he'd lay a road through the jungle. Just like that. How often did I see evidence of this in Angola!

And, as the Angolans themselves told me, in contrast to all other colonies, there wasn't and still today isn't such extreme anger in Angola against the former colonists, although of course there were also bitter exceptions. It is a historical fact that very many Portuguese colonists were slaughtered in Angola, more than in Mozambique. But there were no particularly bitter tirades against them generally. This was because the Portuguese used the carrot along with the stick, with their *assimilado* policy. When an Angolan supposedly relinquished his native language and his tribe and agreed to become a citizen of Portugal, they sent him to study in Portugal, after which he was supposed to support Portuguese policy, even back home in his own country. Both Angola's first president, Agostinho Neto, and the current president, José Eduardo dos Santos, came from this *assimilado* background.

So, here we arrived in Lubango together with one more interpreter, Volodya Korolkov, who went on to serve with the 2nd brigade in Cahama. We were met by the Soviet colonel who was adviser to the military district political section. He sat us down and began to work on our political orientation – what type of place we were in, and what we were and weren't allowed to do. First of all, he told us to watch out for diseases. He went on:

“Obviously, there is a war on here and the situation is very difficult, but somehow still bearable. On the other hand, malaria, amoebic dysentery, hepatitis are simply intolerable.” Of course we’d already heard all this in Luanda. He recommended a specific prophylactic, Delagil. “Drink it as prescribed but watch out ... Last month, they took away two of our advisers with cerebral malaria – it was a horrible situation. As we joked: either you die or you become an idiot.

“Also watch out for relations with women. For this, you’ll be sent back to the Soviet Union at once. But worse: if you, God forbid, pick up some disease, then of course you’ll be far worse off.” This actually happened because some time before our arrival they had taken away two of our own men – one an adviser, a lieutenant-colonel, and the other a soldier. Their scrotums were swollen. They’d slept with local women and picked up the “Hong Kong Rose”. It is unbelievable the mix of diseases they picked up. Even after medical analyses in Lubango and Luanda, no one understood the nature of their ailment. Symptoms of gonorrhoea would disappear, to be followed by ones of syphilis, then other venereal diseases would crop up. So they were sent home without a proper diagnosis. Unfortunately I don’t know what happened to them after all this.

So, in general, the colonel spoke only about real, practical problems. And, said he, “Conduct yourselves properly, don’t swear, don’t smoke in bed, cross the road only at the green light.” Well, on the whole he vacuum-cleaned our brains for more than two hours. And yes, we did break out in a sweat a number of times.

Volodya Korolkov left for the 2nd brigade in Cahama. As for us, together with Piotr Ivanovsky, we stayed another three days and at last the advisers from our own brigade arrived: Viktor Vladimirovich, adviser to the chief of the brigade rear units, who then perished (God save his soul!) as well as the interpreter whom Piotr was supposed to replace. Formally there was no interpreter in the Kvadrat unit, so I was to go there. Up to then only one interpreter worked both in the Kvadrat unit and in the brigade and it was not so easy for him.

Viktor Vladimirovich, he died later in a car crash and I don’t really remember his surname – but our beds stood next to each other. He loved

reading at bedtime. There was a lamp under his mosquito net but it was so strong that you couldn't sleep next to it. I usually hung a blanket between us, but the light lit up everything anyhow. He read in a very peculiar way – he'd hardly finish a page and a half before he would start to snore.

I'd call out: "Viktor Vladimirovich!"

"Oh, yes!"

"Are you reading or sleeping?"

"Yes, I am reading such an interesting book. I just want to read a little and then I'll put out the light." And within a minute or two he was snoring again.

We stayed in a small house equipped with our ordinary army beds. We hung a mosquito net over each bed. There were also nets over the windows, but what was the point? After all, if the doors are constantly open the mosquitoes fly in anyway.

"Don't give a damn about all those sprays and ointments!" our veteran interpreters told us. "It doesn't help, especially because you don't immediately notice how the mosquitoes are biting you anyway. Here you've spent just a few days in Angola and you see you've already been bitten ... now the malaria will simply wait for that favourable moment to incubate. The symptoms are sniffing and a head cold. That's enough to signal your first attack of malaria."

Our dining room was the usual hut, called a *quimbo*. It was quite big and covered with grass in the traditional Angolan-African style, and the kitchen, also built like that, contained the stove. Our previous advisers had put it up themselves, so by then it was more or less working properly.

The bath, made out of the body of a rocket, was filled with water and heated so well from below, it turned into a steam bath. The bathhouse itself was made of wood planks. Not very far away from us, about half way to Matala – one of the points we passed on our way to Lubango – was a eucalyptus grove where we collected twigs as substitute for the birch twigs we'd used for steam baths in our homeland.

I mention Matala. The point is that we didn't use the direct route to Lubango. That one was only just over 100 km, but the road passed through the Biquar national park and was mined and frequented by UNITA gangs,

so it was risky. That's why we had to go via Matala, adding another 60 km to the distance.

A Cuban tank battalion was deployed in Matala guarding a hydroelectric power station run by Soviet specialists. We laughed at this battalion! One Cuban or Angolan tank battalion consisted of 22 tanks, mostly T-54B or T-55. This one had 100, like five battalions in one. At first there were only T-55s and later on the more modern T-62 tanks were added.

The road we took from Matala to Lubango was more or less a normal tar road although, to be sure, also full of ruts and potholes. And it was in these very grooves and potholes that UNITA usually placed their mines, so we travelled along as carefully as we could. And when it was not possible to skirt the holes – when there were just too many holes in the asphalt – then people were blown up by the mines. Still, the road was usually more or less okay and we could reach Matala relatively quickly.

But the road from Matala to our own town of Mulondo was terrible. It was hardly more than a cart track and very little of it tarred, so it took much longer to travel on.

In Matala, of course we often visited the Soviet specialists who worked at the hydroelectric power station. These were splendid fellows. In fact we stayed with them and ate with them, after which we'd go to a farm to buy vegetables. There we were entertained by some Portuguese guys who hadn't fled the country after independence in 1975.

In 1986, when we arrived in Angola, there were about 60 000 Portuguese and many mulattos in the country. These Portuguese lived like kings. I remember a Portuguese man named Ferazh, whom we called Bortsch. He was simply thrilled when we called him that – after all, Ferazh means “bortsch” in Portuguese. We often visited him – he would snap his fingers and have us seated in the shade on stools and on wicker easy chairs. We'd be served beer, cold as spring water. And we sat there, enjoying the beer, and when our glasses were almost empty he'd snap his fingers again and more would be brought in. Next to us sat the local commissar of Matala, who, poor devil, would be sucking out of a single bottle for the entire evening, because they wouldn't bring him any more beer.

Bortsch loved the Soviets. And he'd sell us his vegetables and fruit at

the official state prices, very cheap! Of course we were very grateful. To the commissar, he would sell at normal market prices – a few kilograms of tomatoes cost roughly 3000 kwanzas at market prices and only 300 at state prices. Indeed, he sold us the produce at state prices without any problem. He always asked us to visit him more often and treated us very well.

I think we first drank beer at Ferazh's place when we'd just joined the brigade. Piotr Ivanovsky and I were going into unknown, yet I felt somehow more or less at peace. Well, I thought, people know why they are going and where. What's more, I was with Piotr, who was five years older than I was. He was so confident – in fact already a family man and a former warrant officer and he'd already seen quite a lot in his life. So, first we visited our specialists from the hydroelectric power station, which always took far too long for my liking, and then we visited Ferazh. As it began to get dark I'd say, "Petya, what do you think, when should we leave?"

"Well, I wouldn't know," he'd reply.

One time I looked around – everyone was drinking beer and discussing things in general. Then the adviser to the commander of our rear units, Viktor Vladimirovich, arrived from Lubango to pick us up. His driver was one of our soldiers (and his name was Victor!) who spoke Portuguese fluently as he'd already been in Angola for a year and a half. He chatted away in Portuguese, no problem. Finally, it got very dark and at last we left.

Now we had to go on the road in full darkness. But this Victor was a very reliable driver, and Piotr and I were sitting inside a GAZ-66 two-ton truck with sub-machine-guns at the ready but not knowing where we were going! Around us was forest after forest, road after road, jungle after jungle – and only the devil knew who might be lurking there. To be sure, the road was protected by FAPLA block stations, but, still, the distances between these stations were considerable. We just had to drive through from one block station to the next.

The principal post for us was Shivakusi, where our brigade's area of responsibility began. We drove on. I said, "Petya, couldn't we have set off earlier?" He just swore, he wasn't in great shape by then. We got to our brigade with no mishap, thank God!

With the 19th brigade

I spent my first year in Angola with the 19th brigade down south in the province of Huila, just beyond Lubango, near a little place called Mulondo. The Kvadrat anti-aircraft unit was also based there. In the brigade, our lives were more or less worked out for us. At first, a specialist waiting to be replaced worked with me at the Kvadrat. He was very competent and the Angolans greatly respected him. Then Nikolay Nikolayevich Ovcharov arrived. We worked together for nine months, until my leave in 1987.

The brigade was on high alert, responsible for its particular area, while all around it the UNITA bandits operated freely. Three separate brigades were covering three main arterial roads. The first road led towards Lubango and on to the capital, Luanda. This was the responsibility of the 2nd brigade, based next to Cahama astride a road coming straight from Namibia. The second, from Namibe (Moçâmedes) to Mulondo and Matala, was looked after by us in the 19th brigade. The third, where the 35th brigade was, covered Techamutete. So there were three brigades at full strength that served the fifth military district, each covering one of the main transport arteries.

Quite near by were camps for Namibian refugees. They were constantly being attacked by the South African special forces, which would come and burn these camps down. You could go to Matala and pass the camps, and then, on your return soon afterwards, one of them would be in ruins.

What with having SWAPO bases and camps of Namibian refugees in our area, there was always an 'interesting' war going on in this 5th military district. The commander of the South African forces would write to the Angolan commander of the military district, "Why are you supporting SWAPO? We know their bases exist in certain places in your own military district."

And in fact, right near Lubango there was a large training camp for SWAPO recruits where our advisers and specialists were working. Again, the South African commander would write to his Angolan counterpart, "Why are you supporting SWAPO? If you continue to support them, I will in such and such a place, at such and such a time and with such and such forces, carry out such and such a type of terrorist action." And what

do you know! The attack would happen just where and when he'd said it would.

A good example of South African action was when the road from Lubango to Namibe was blown up. This was the "snake", a hairpin mountain road going down more than 3000 metres to sea level, overlooking the area between Lubango and Namibe Province. This area has splendid views, in fact I have photos of some of them, like one of a coloured cliff. This cliff is one of the most beautiful sights, especially at sunrise. Whenever we set off for Namibe we'd leave very early in the morning and stop to look at the sun rising over the mountains and lighting up this coloured cliff. The sun would illuminate the rocks in various iridescent hues. The effect was simply spectacular.

This mountain section of the road was about 17 km long. At the most difficult part, where two vehicles could hardly pass each other, the South Africans placed their landmines. Once, just when they were busy doing so, about to blow up the road, a Soviet colleague in military counterintelligence came along on his own. He saw some people moving about. Several were whites, the rest were blacks. They were dressed in rather strange camouflage. They saw him in his open car and waved him through. He passed them and suddenly – *bang-bang!* They'd blown up the road! These were interesting moments, typical of this kind of war.

All this may seem macabrely funny but the road from us to Matala was almost constantly disrupted by UNITA guerrillas and units of the South African army. They moved at will through Angolan territory. Once our brigade was cut off from Lubango for more than a month, and we had to stay in touch with the rest of Angola by radio. This was very disturbing, even though our 19th brigade was considered a very strong and capable unit.

And these UNITA soldiers simply dived with death, the way they used their equipment. When they began bombarding Cuito Cuanavale in September 1987 it was unbelievable how they handled their 81-mm mortars. We heard that they placed two sticks crosswise, at right angles to each other, and put the mortar barrel over them with no base plate underneath to stop it from being driven into the ground by the constant

firing. These guys would just drop in the shells so that they landed on the firing pin and trust to luck that their unstable mortar wouldn't get skewed and blow them to bits.

Daily life? Sport? According to our doctors, weightlifting and other strenuous activities weren't recommended in Angola because we as Europeans were already in a difficult climate and also there were diseases to consider. So we were advised only to do things like swimming and jogging. Sports such as football and volleyball were also allowed because they weren't too stressful.

Cards, chequers, backgammon – we played everything like that. Naturally, there were few entertainments, and to tell the truth we didn't have enough time for all those things. Well, I didn't bother with the usual backgammon rules – but perhaps I simply didn't want to. But later on our artillery specialist Sushchenko and our technician Sasha Fatyanov became masters of the game and played together constantly. As for cards, these people played King, the "officers' preference", all the time.

At Cuito there were some grand masters of King, like Col. Nikolai Vladimirovich Zinoviev, our chief specialist. I was in the Pechora air-defence brigade at the time. In the beginning he won everything he could (although, on the whole, we always played for cigarettes). Later on, out of the goodness of his heart, he would begin to hand these cigarettes back. He just couldn't stand seeing how people were torturing themselves without the cigarettes they'd lost to him. I tried this game too but somehow it didn't attract me, even though people said I had a gift for it.

I acquired a habit from my stay in Africa: drinking lots of water. We were urged to drink all we possibly could in order to flush everything out and also to sweat – to clean out the body, so to speak. If you contracted malaria, you had to drink a lot of water to get rid of the disease.

After returning from our morning work in the 19th brigade, knocking off around twelve thirty and with lunch until one, we'd follow up with a siesta, the 'African hour'. You go to bed and sleep from one to two thirty, then you wash and return to your duties. I couldn't sleep at that time of day, so I busied myself with various domestic chores. Life was interesting anyway, being my first time abroad, and knowing the language I could

make myself understood and follow what people were saying.

There were many things to become acquainted with, so much beauty, even splendour, plus jungles, mountains, plateaus and the Cunene River itself. At the Cunene we'd wash our underclothes and we'd fish. Everyone had his own fishing rod, and when we got tired of all that we used an explosive "sapper's rod" – a grenade was thrown into the water and then we stood in the river and collected the fish floating about.

The *donka*, fish that were stunned by the explosion but not surfacing, were difficult to spot. The Angolans, standing behind us, usually collected them. They'd dive into the water and I was always amazed at how easily they saw the fish. You could stand and look around and not see a thing while the Angolan behind you kept on hauling out the stunned fish. Their eyesight was so much better than ours.

They could see very well at night too, even without a moon. There were such moments, particularly at first, when you were on guard duty and had to check the observation posts. You're stepping out, there's no moon, so you can't see the Angolans. But you have a flashlight available, everything seems in order and you go to the observation post you had in mind, where this African is supposed to be standing. Meanwhile, you're afraid to turn on the flashlight because, after all, in the light you could also be shot at. Now you call out "*Guarda!*" ("Sentry!") and at that very moment you hear the reply "*Assessor!*" ("Adviser!") from somewhere behind you. Your heart sinks – you'd walked right past him and because he's black you couldn't see him. He'd been standing at his post, waiting for your call.

We had two watchdogs, Rex and Muneka. They were mongrels but very fit, especially Muneka, who'd belonged to the Cubans (in Spanish *muneka* means "little boy" or "dolly"). A Cuban sentry had wounded him accidentally in the belly. Muneka was dying, with his belly full of pus, when our advisers took him away, but with our care he got better. From then on, he ruled all the territory under his control. Muneka and Rex had regular fights, sorting out who was the more powerful. Usually they were just lying around at the outside doors of our little house. Rex lay at the main exit and Muneka at the other one. They always rushed inside whenever there were hyenas around. They were very afraid of hyenas because hyenas

hate dogs and tear them to pieces.

Next to us was a company of military police. Even though our territories were clearly demarcated, Muneka taught those Angolans to respect order. At first they travelled freely throughout our area, but the Cubans had already trained Muneka to be a watchdog. In the beginning it was very funny, of course. An African would pass by and Muneka would rush up to him and tear his trouser leg from thigh to foot. After this, the Africans began to walk carefully around our territory.

Then there was our flock of goats and pigs, and also a monkey, Keshka – a green South American marmoset who was tied to a chain. These formed our livestock.

After the lunch break we returned to work. When Nikolay Nikolayevich Ovcharov arrived, he cancelled our afternoon trips to work in the Kvadrat unit. Instead he kept us busy and useful in managing our official work. But if we had to go to the Kvadrat unit to sort out a problem, I would go along with the brigade advisers.

Nikolay Nikolayevich was a most remarkable person and in every sense a specialist. Even if he didn't know the detail of some problem he'd solve it by trial and error. And whenever the Angolans talked about him they would knowingly raise a finger, roll their eyes and say with awe, "His head is screwed on right!" They'd pronounce his name with great respect.

He was an anti-aircraft specialist, working at the Kvadrat anti-aircraft missile complex. His job was to maintain and service electrical installations and motors. He and Petya Ivanovsky were always constructing things. Petya worked directly with the brigade while I worked at the Kvadrat complex. But of course, officially or unofficially, we went back and forth, working in both places.

There was enough work, sometimes even too much. This or that question would arise, which meant we had to go to the brigade or participate in conferences, prepare operations to clean enemy fighters out of the area, translate written texts ... We helped each other, of course. I couldn't sit and watch Petya struggle with tons of translation while I had no work at all. Anyway Petya and I were fellow countrymen – he also was from Byelorussia and we were both from the Gomel district. We even had

the same birthday, 15 August.

Once he and I had a wild experience. We laugh about it now, but at the time he was in no mood for laughing. On Saturdays we had our usual clean-up day. I was responsible for the outside toilet, a deep pit covered with wood that had two holes with panel boards over them, framed by ceramic pipes. My duty was to fill a bucket with diesel oil, pour it into the pit and throw in burning paper to burn everything up. After that I'd put the boards back on the holes.

That day I'd done everything as usual and gone to help Alexander Nikolayevich, our artilleryman, with his truck. Later we were sitting on a bench, basking in the sun and chatting about this and that. Just then, Petya visited the toilet "to think a bit", as he used to say. He had on his vest and trunks.

Suddenly we heard an explosion and Ivanovsky's sophisticated swearing. He yelled, "Where is that Zhdarkin? I'll kill him!"

Nikolayevich got the picture. "Igor, run away, hide!"

Later on, after Petya calmed down, he told us what had happened. He'd gone in, sat down and lit a cigarette. He was in a serene mood; he even hummed a tune. Usually after smoking, Petya would just drop the stub down the pit before getting up. Heaven only knows what stopped him doing it this time. He stood up, turned round and only then threw the stub down the hole.

The diesel oil hadn't burnt out completely. Besides, since the holes had boards enclosing them, a lot of gas had accumulated down there. The explosion was so strong, Petya was thrown out with his eyebrows, eyelashes, moustache and his carefully groomed beard gone. On top of all that, he realised what would have happened if he'd still been sitting. He rushed like a mad beast. It's a good thing that I managed to hide in the woods in time. He'd have for starters taken me apart – he's built like a bull. But he couldn't do a thing about his eyebrows and lashes...

Well, from the time Nikolay Nikolayevich arrived, careless behaviour was almost completely eliminated. He conducted regular inspections of the troops. Every installation had to report on every single person's work. He checked everything. He forced both the Kvadrat unit commander and

his chief of staff to list their duties time after time, to the point where operational activities became completely automatic. It meant working with documents, some manual work, and naturally no errors.

I myself, translating, learnt how to work the missile launcher. As for Nikolay Nikolayevich Ovcharov, he was a great specialist in all these matters. When he was travelling with the brigade advisers there was plenty of work for me to do, with drawing up maps, military preparations, taking part in conferences, written and oral translations.

Then two specialists, Majors Butesku and Sasha Osmolovsky, arrived. They were experts in sound-tracking reconnaissance. Clearly they were important, capable people and knowledgeable about their work. They were able to relay all their know-how to the Angolans. And not only could they communicate, they were willing to do so. I managed to work with them several times when they were busy, translating to the Angolans. I saw how the Angolans at once reached out to them, asking many questions, trying to learn new techniques, while our specialists patiently explained how to do this, how to set up that.

Fortunately, most of our Soviet military advisers and specialists were like that. Of course there were also those who were indifferent or simply ignorant, but it was interesting that the Africans saw through them as people who had simply come to Angola to earn a little money. No one had anything to learn from them.

And the technical specialists in particular reached out to other people because they also wanted to learn. This made working with them very pleasant. Most of all, besides having an excellent knowledge of their own special fields, they tried to learn how to instruct the Angolans in Portuguese – that is, if they weren't next to a translator. They could at least explain how to turn something off and on, how to adjust the system and so on. Examples of such excellent people were Butesku, Osmolovsky, Nikolay Nikolayevich Ovcharov and Alexander Nikolayevich Zyemlyakov, our artillery expert. There were many Soviet staff officers and advisers who taught the Angolans how to draw maps, make decisions to go on the defensive as well as on the offensive, and other military tactics. I think the Angolans are grateful to them for what they learnt, even today.

I was also very grateful that I landed in such a situation. It is one thing just to learn the language and have a conversation in it, and quite another to apply your knowledge directly to such stressful work. In fact my first year in Angola gave me the opportunity to apply my knowledge in practice. In the Portuguese courses at our military institute in Moscow, we had to learn a lot of military terms by heart and things about tactics, such as the line of attack, the line of deployment of columns, of a platoon or of a company... My God, there was so much rubbish of all sorts, it sometimes turned into a mess. But our instructors told us we couldn't work without understanding all these things, and they were right. Indeed, within two weeks in Angola I got to know all these terms, particularly after having to use them all the time. And we always carried notebooks with us. If I didn't know a word I'd write it in Russian or ask the Angolans if I could look it up in their dictionaries to get the Portuguese meaning. I'd also brought some useful notebooks from Russia with me on the different kinds of arms and services, and they helped me a lot.

Even so, it was very difficult to work with the two advisers – the artillery specialist and the deputy commander for political affairs. With the artillery specialist, nobody could understand him for love or money, even when he spoke Russian – all these artillery terms and references – and to think that it all still had to be put into Portuguese! Mind you, to our delight, most of the Angolan artillery officers had either studied in the Soviet Union or been trained in Angola by Soviet specialists, so they understood the Russian gunner. If something was translated poorly, Alexander Nikolayevich Zyemlyakov would give the Russian equivalent and try to explain himself as far as he could. The Angolans treated him with great respect. I did too, and the same with Nicolay Nikolayevich, for their know-how, skills and erudition.

With the deputy commander for political affairs it was all too difficult, having to translate his avalanche of words. Five minutes of him would in fact take only two to translate. "And why did you talk so little, while I spoke so much?" he would ask. How to explain this to him? For all the words in Russian meaning "courage" there was only one Angolan word, *coragem*. And so on.

This was the normal course of our daily work. All the discussions and training exercises were for military purposes. The battalions were regularly sent out to clear the territory of the enemy. Constant raids were conducted in all directions. We often also helped them prepare for actual operations but didn't participate ourselves, thank God. Overall, my first year passed very fruitfully in terms of dealing with the language, as well as contact with people and getting military and other experience.

The Kvadrat complex was an exported, transplanted version of our Soviet "Kub" complex. It consisted of a control station and four missile launchers. Each missile launcher had its own separate control and all four were linked to the central control station. I've already forgotten the radius but certainly the South African pilots preferred to avoid the Kvadrat area. Kvadrat, Pechora (S-125) and Volga (S-75), with their rockets, were a thorn in the flesh for those pilots. They feared these anti-aircraft systems, seeing them as very effective.

The Pechora operated against enemy aircraft at a height of anywhere from 50 up to 25 000 metres. It was a Soviet anti-aircraft defence system delivered to Angola. Our specialists also came with it. Our own men sat next to the computer screen whenever it was necessary to shoot something down. The target would flash on the screen. The Angolans, you see, had one major problem: sometimes they just couldn't get the target. I was only an interpreter and hadn't studied how to do all this but even I managed to operate it – our specialists had shown me exactly how and what to do. You pressed the buttons, locking onto the target. The missile was self-guided with an infrared sensor in the warhead. Four rockets would strike at the target – something relatively simple.

The Angolans weren't always able to operate the computer screen. Secondly, they couldn't operate the buttons to activate the four rockets, one after the other. The trajectory of the rocket on its way to the target is right there on the computer screen. As it reaches the target you press a button that detonates the rocket and the fragments destroy the enemy aircraft.

Our anti-aircraft system was the best in the world, but only ever as good as the people controlling it. One day in August 1988, the president

of Botswana was on his way to a summit in Luanda in a two-engine plane, escorted by a fighter aircraft. We weren't aware of this and suddenly we saw the planes flying overhead. Already, one and a half years earlier, this route had been ruled out of bounds for civilian aircraft because of military activities. A signal was sent to the planes requesting identification – "Friend or foe?" No answer. We saw four rockets being launched, one after the other. But again the usual thing happened: who sat at the screen? Angolans. Not one of the four rockets found its target because they hadn't pressed the buttons or else they didn't press the right one.

We Soviets knew at once that these guys had messed up. We jumped into our car and rushed over to the control room; it was all recorded on the screen. The Angolans told us, "Well, we looked at the screen and saw the rockets reaching the aeroplane – the first, second, third and fourth. But for some reason, they didn't strike the target." It was appalling – but in this case, thank God.

We heard the rest of the story later. The fighter escort of the president had executed an anti-missile manoeuvre but lost control of his aircraft and crashed. As the rocket moved towards his plane he dived sharply while doing a half-roll. If you're able to get out of the spin – good show! If not, excuse me. This guy couldn't. It seems the Botswanan pilot was insufficiently trained. He fell and that was it. It happened in front of our eyes.

As for the president of Botswana, he just flew ahead on his own. His aircraft soon entered the airspace controlled by the Cubans. A Cuban MiG-23 was sent to intercept. It fired two missiles, the first one hit one engine, which fell down. The second missile followed that falling engine instead of the aircraft itself – and that's the lucky reason why President Masire of Botswana managed to survive.²⁸

Meanwhile, back at the Pechora, we'd been trying to work out what happened. Our leader, Col. Maslov, asked the Angolans, "Why didn't you press the button?"

"Well, we forgot", they replied. Okay – what can one do about it?

Our leader sent a report to Luanda: "We fired at the plane but did not bring it down." But what does it matter? "And you, where were you Soviet

boys during this action? No day off for you! You should have assisted them on a 24-hour basis.” Who is responsible – the Angolans? Why curse them? The Soviets, after all, weren’t there to advise them. So the Soviets are the fools, yet again. That was the clear and constant rule in Angola: if there was any failure, the guilty ones were the Soviets. And if there were any successes, the Angolans got the credit.

Landmines and Portuguese-speaking cows

I have to tell you about the Portuguese-speaking cows. It was in 1986, at the beginning of the rainy season. A commission arrived to visit us in the 19th brigade, composed partly of officials from the district and senior bureaucrats from Luanda, headed by Col. Mishchenko, secretary of the Party organisation in Angola, and Soviet military advisers from the Luanda general staff. They inspected the military facilities, the defence positions, and even visited a minefield.

It happened that, in the opinion of the high command, everything about us in the 19th brigade was “bad”, even “very bad”. At the evening meeting, Mishchenko repeated all the alleged shortcomings, and there remained nothing for us to do except to agree humbly, because the commander’s always right!

On top of everything, the inspector-engineer asked: “By the way, don’t you mine your mission at night?” We were all stunned. Finally the chief of our group exclaimed: “But, excuse me, what for?”

“What for?” The inspector-engineer was genuinely surprised, “For your own security! At night you place the mines, in the morning you take them away. It’s all so very simple.”

Someone answered him: “You see, the civilian population lives around here – their cows and goats roam about, sometimes just on their own.”

“So what? – then you display warning signs in Portuguese, for example ‘Watch out for mines’ or something similar.”

I was just a young junior lieutenant and hadn’t been allowed to speak, but I lost patience at that point and blurted out: “But of course, and then the cows will go and read the signboards in Portuguese.” If you could burn a man to cinders with a look, then Mishchenko’s would have turned me

into a heap of ashes. But it was a silly thing for him to have said.

On that inspection trip through the minefield, the inspector-engineer proposed that we walk through it to check it all. The eyes of Maj. Durdenko, the adviser to the battalion commander, nearly jumped out of his head, and it was the same with the rest of the staff, Soviet and Angolan. But, as they say, there's nothing for it: if the chief wants it, so must we.

We all moved in single file and I put myself at the very end. As we went along, the engineer exclaimed, "Well, where are these mines? I don't see them." And then he almost stepped on one as the local district engineer, Ignatiev, yanked him back. The inspector-engineer was very pleased to see a mine and proposed that Durdenko check out the condition of this mine. Durdenko of course refused. The inspector began to assure him that it was not dangerous. The main thing, he said, was not to put pressure on the lever. Durdenko explained in very vivid Russian words, that at this stage he could only with difficulty even imagine such a lever.

Finally the task fell to Ignatiev as district engineer, who unscrewed the lever and everybody could see there was some water inside the mine and a couple of rust spots. "See this here," the inspector exclaimed, "and all because the mines haven't been maintained in the proper manner!" From his words, we gathered that the Angolans, together with our advisers, should regularly conduct similar trips into the minefield, unscrew the levers and service the mines. How exactly the Angolans would be driven into the minefield, he didn't explain.

Ignatiev stayed with us after the commission left, to inspect the equipment as he'd been told, starting with the mines. He also had to do some training of the Angolans. He seemed a very calm, composed man, without pretences. I became good friends with him, particularly when he realised I was serving in the sapper corps. I worked with him for over two weeks.

And, frankly speaking, there was a lot of work. There were very few competent engineers in the brigade, and the Angolans didn't have any specific knowledge in this area of expertise. All mines as well as their fuses were checked and maintained. (I should mention that, in general, the mines were sensibly stored with sufficient precautionary measures, but

how they were maintained was another matter.) We showed the Angolans how to charge the fuses: wind them up like an alarm clock, press on the levers and they are ready for action. The Angolans liked all this very much. Several of them spent half a day with us, “playing with alarm clocks”. We repeated several times that they shouldn’t throw mines around as if they were watermelons. Otherwise, one never knows, they could blow themselves up.

Yet, one day, this is exactly what happened. We were sitting at home in the mission, resting after dinner. Suddenly in the distance there was a powerful explosion and the earth shook under our feet. Ignatiev and I looked at each other, realised what had happened and rushed off to the brigade in our car. Several Angolans had been packing mines into a large dugout for storage. One Angolan stood deep in the dugout near a pile of mines, while another was in the centre of the dugout and a third stood at the entrance. A fourth stood outside. They tossed the mines to each other just as we’d warned them not to do. Evidently, someone failed to catch a mine, and with the storehouse almost full of mines ... Sadly, out of all four, they found only the boot of the Angolan who’d stood outside.

With the 21st brigade

Altogether there were about 2000 people in the Angolan 21st brigade. There were no Cubans and just six of our Soviet specialists, among these one interpreter – myself. I arrived at Cuito Cuanavale on 10 October 1987. I’d never bargained on being in that place so much, and under such extreme conditions. Later on, in March 1988, after two and a half months’ absence in Lobito, I returned to Cuito. When I arrived there the lads told me, “Well, Igor, you fine fellow, you’ve returned.” When I left for the first time, they’d told me, “Igor, you will return.” I said, “OK, but you are talking rubbish.” But they insisted – “you will return.” And look, I was summoned back to Cuito, just as they’d said.

The first bombardment occurred 19 km from Cuito Cuanavale. We were driving in a column consisting of tanks, armoured troop carriers and trucks loaded with ammunition and supplies (the Angolans didn’t venture forth without plenty of food to eat). There were the two-ton

trucks (GAZ-66s) and Brazilian Engesa-50 lorries. Some 70 per cent of the column in fact consisted of these Engesa lorries. It moved along newly constructed roads.

In front of our very eyes – indeed five times – tanks exploded into the air. This was UNITA's tactic. Just within the woods there, they had placed anti-tank mines with two boxes of TNT under each because they knew approximately where we would be moving. The tanks would bump into the trees at the side of the road, just where the mines and their two boxes of TNT waited. The devil only knows how much TNT they used! There's 25 kg in each box. In front of my eyes, a tank's turret once flew into the air and turned round and round, as if in slow motion.

I can honestly say I don't consider myself either particularly cowardly or brave, but being bombarded was always most unpleasant, and more so that first time because we found ourselves very close to our base camp. They hit us with everything they had.

And then we had to face a minefield. Our brigade was moving in two columns as I was climbing out of my armoured troop carrier and about to jump down to the ground. A black soldier from the other vehicle suddenly cried out to me, "Don't go down!"

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"We've stumbled onto a minefield!"

"But where is this minefield?" I persisted.

"Everywhere, so don't go down!" he repeated, adding, "What do you want to do anyway?"

"Well, sorry, but I want to take a piss," I said.

"So just piss straight from the top of your armoured carrier!" was the reply.

We paused there for about forty minutes. The Shambinga River was very near us, and all our traffic set off in that direction. Well, we moved for five minutes and then we stopped again for half an hour. What was particularly awful was that South African aircraft accompanied us at low altitude and strafed us wherever possible. This happened everywhere and it was something to see!

I'll tell you about the Strela-2M anti-aircraft systems used against

these low-level attacks. On our adviser's armoured troop carrier several Angolans sat with protective goggles and Strela-2M missiles over their shoulders. They were very proud of themselves. The first time I caught sight of these anti-aircraft personnel, I asked them why in hell they were sitting there and whether they needed anything.

"We'll protect you!" was their answer. And they looked very brave and gallant. All right, but after some time, when South African fighter aircraft flew over – either Mirages I or III or Impalas (the aircraft that constantly attacked our column) – I looked around and wondered where those brave Angolan anti-aircraft men were. They were nowhere to be seen! Then, thank God, the air raids stopped, and I crawled out of my troop carrier.

As a matter of fact, once when I crawled out after an air raid I asked, "But where were you all?"

They replied, "Here is the shrapnel and here is where we jumped off, and this is how it turned out."

I then said, "Lads, I still don't understand one thing – why the devil are you just sitting here – in order to protect us, you say? But you do nothing!" And then, after all this nonsense, I just chased them away. They're in an air raid once, twice, three times, and still nobody is fighting back. Oh sure! Instead of shooting at the enemy planes, they run away!

And surely it was possible to take action against low-level aerial attack with the equipment they had. Why not? The Strela-1 and Strela-2 portable anti-aircraft kits were all-purpose weapons. They had a range of 3200 metres. They were better than the Stinger version, cheaper too. These, as well as the Strela-10, included four rockets each. Then there were also the Igla-1 and Igla-2 with ranges of up to 3000 metres. So they had the capability of bringing down any aircraft we wished. But the Angolans were afraid to use such spectacular weapons.

Cuito Cuanavale was known as "Ponto de Resistencia", point of resistance. I just want to bow my head in respect for those of our Soviet military personnel who were there. They were the ones who did everything they could to achieve something, to somehow improve the situation. But, perhaps regrettably, we always ran up against a wall, with the attitude of the Angolans towards all that happened there. You could simply beat your

head and do nothing more.

There were some Angolans who wanted to change the situation. One in particular came to us complaining all the time: "You know, nobody wants to do anything." But on the whole the Angolans were absolutely indifferent to everything. This good man said, "*Todo o tempo sabotagem!* (All the time, sabotage!) I want to do something but all I see is sabotage." Within a couple of days, at the head of a column of Angolan soldiers, he ran into the South Africans. Being a remarkably brave fellow, he dashed ahead and his armoured car was destroyed by a direct hit from a shell. It is a great pity because, unfortunately, such fine people are the exception to the rule.

While at Cuito Cuanavale we lived about 13 km outside town in a dugout camp in the jungle because the town was always being bombarded. We were being hit with 120-mm and 81-mm mortars and 155-mm guns. The shells of those guns are approximately one metre long and fly as far as 47 kilometres. Sometimes, to be as effective as possible, the South Africans would transport their artillery batteries, the G-5 and the G-6, very close to the Angolan positions. The G-5 is simply a gun, but the G-6 is a self-propelled artillery piece.

Every time that they used their G-5s, the Cubans in Pechora were able to determine the trajectory of the projectiles. They would then send their MiG-23s to attack the battery. As a result, the South Africans began to use their G-6. It was, after all, mobile – it fired a few volleys and moved off. Just like that!

We found ourselves under bombardment many times. In the end, the leader of our Pechora group gathered us specialists together and said, "Lads, we didn't come here to lay down our lives but to fulfil our international duty and earn some money too. So let's find refuge in the brigade if it's really urgent."

This was very wise advice. The South African artillery and sound-tracking reconnaissance were first class, give them their due. On a hill on the other side of the Cuito River sat the South African observer. His job was to relay the coordinates of targets to his gun battery. The South African gunners would locate their targets very fast and fire immediately.

The Pechora complex in Cuito Cuanavale significantly interfered with the South African aircraft so that they couldn't fulfil their normal task of providing support for the ground forces. That's why the South African guns persistently bombarded the Pechora position. We joked bitterly that the South African bombardments continued 25 hours out of 24.

We didn't even have time to wash ourselves normally, with hot water. We just had to splash ourselves with cold. And when we were positioned at the Miane River at the end of October and the start of November, our technician Sasha Fatyanov suddenly asked me while we were sleeping under an armoured troop carrier, "Igor, don't you feel something running around on your body?"

I'd been having that very feeling for the past few days and thought of lice. I'd met them before, when serving in the garrison in the Siberian military district. We'd struggled to overcome the pests.

When Sasha Fatyanov and I checked our clothes, we found many of them in all the folds and wrinkles. Sasha Fatyanov identified them as the usual kind, so we had to destroy our clothing. The combat situation was calm at that stage and we had time to boil water and wash ourselves well. Our garments still had to be burnt even though the Africans begged us not to burn them, saying they would take them over and soak them in kerosene to destroy the lice. We decided not to take risks as the Africans slept next to us under the armoured troop carrier and we didn't want to pick up these things again. We burnt our clothes.

The 25th of December is a holiday for the Angolans – not only because of Christmas but also as Family Day. Naturally we counted on the goodwill of the South Africans, hoping they wouldn't spoil it. But already at eight o'clock in the morning, breakfast time, they launched eight shells at the command post of our brigade. All day they fired at us – more than 120 shells from 120-mm guns. Between 17:00 and 18:00, 85 shells rained down on our position.

The entire day there was firing, to the point of physical exhaustion. When it finally ended, we went to our improvised kitchen and found that all the kitchen utensils, the crockery, the table, the tarpaulin and the water-filled barrel had been pierced by shell fragments. When we decided at last

to drown our sorrows in drink, Sasha Fatyanov suddenly announced that the canister with our 'fire water' had been perforated right at the bottom by a shell fragment and all the hooch had run out. This was just too much! At that moment the brigade commander arrived, learned about our grief, and offered his help. A soldier brought spirits from the brigade commander's reserve stock and at last we relaxed.

I remember very clearly how our group of advisers, headed by Lt.-Col. Artiomenko, left the 21st brigade for Cuito Cuanavale in the early morning of 27 December 1987. We started very early in the morning on our APC. Our brigade wasn't so far from Cuito Cuanavale but we knew the way could be very difficult because of the South African shelling and bombardments and the activity of UNITA in our rear. And the most dangerous time could be crossing the bridge over the Cuito River right near Cuito Cuanavale. We saw the gravity of this the last time we were there: the bridge was shelled by South African 155-mm guns.

Near the bridge was a hill covered with dense forest. Usually South African or UNITA artillery reconnaissance scouts, the artillery spotters, sat on the top of that hill. Any movement near the bridge or in the Cuito Cuanavale area was immediately relayed to the South African artillery battery together with coordinates, and the shelling began. The same thing happened when we approached the bridge.

Fortunately we stayed hidden in a forested area while Artiomenko calculated our rush to the bridge. We'd already had enough experience of war in Angola and especially of the bombardments and shelling, so we stood and watched. At first the projectiles fell one after another within two minutes, then within three minutes, and at last – within five minutes. It was a good time to rush to the bridge and cross it. Artiomenko ordered Sasha Fatyanov (who was a driver at that time): "Forward, quickly!"

We sent our prayers up to the Almighty that no Angolans would decide to cross the bridge from the other side of the river, got closer to it – and there was an Angolan tank crawling onto the bridge.

Artiomenko cursed and commanded Fatyanov to drive under the bridge to give us some sort of cover against the South Africans. At the same time one of our Angolan guards (they rode with us on our APC) ran

to the other side of the river to implore the tank crew to clear the bridge and let us cross. He returned after some time saying that the driver in the tank was badly wounded but the Angolans had promised to find a new driver and remove the tank from the bridge (God save us!).

Of course the South African artillery spotter noticed us and the shelling began again. They tried to hit us and their projectiles began to fall closer and closer and in greater numbers. I don't know how much time we spent under that bridge. It seemed like eternity. As you read in novels, my whole life passed in front of my eyes and there was only a small delusionary hope of survival. I was only 22 years old, I can't say I was afraid, but honestly there was no strong desire to die.

Suddenly, thank God, we saw the tank moving away from the bridge and again the command came from Artiomenko: "Forward, rush!" It was our last chance. We practically flew over the bridge to the other side of the Cuito River and hurtled on towards Cuito Cuanavale. (Later, one of our Angolan guards told me that two projectiles had landed right where we'd been some minutes before, at the point on the bridge we'd been hiding under.)

For some time we followed the road to Cuito Cuanavale. I stood in the hatch of our APC. Suddenly one of our guards sitting in front, on top of the APC, started pointing out something behind us. I glanced back and saw a car following us with a white man inside. He waved for us to stop.

We halted and he jumped out of the car and crawled onto our APC. It was Pasha, a Soviet technician and good friend of our own technician Sasha Fatyanov. They'd served together in Afghanistan. They hugged one another and cried. It was the first time in my life that I saw such a scene – two robust fellows, veterans of Afghanistan at that – crying with joy and happiness over the fact that they'd survived the crossing of the bridge.

With the Pechora air-defence system in Cuito Cuanavale

In and around Cuito we travelled by two-ton truck, microbus or jeep; also by armoured personnel carriers and armoured patrol cars. We never closed the hatches of our APCs because if you batten down the hatch and the vehicle detonates a tank mine, it would flatten out everybody inside,

simply smear all the people there along the interior. If you leave it open, you might get away with concussion and perhaps some shrapnel wounds.

A heavy mine definitely penetrates tank armour – as much as 120 mm of armour. I'll go even further and say that the South African APCs – the AML-60 and the AML-90 (the latter equipped with a 90-mm gun) – penetrated many of our tanks as if they were plywood. Our T-55 tanks, equipped with 100-mm guns, were certainly pierced by them. On the other hand, as far as machine guns are concerned, our 14.5-mm KPVTs would penetrate their AML-60 and AML-90 APCs, treating *them* as plywood! The KPVT was a heavy-calibre machine gun installed on the turret of a BTR-60BP APC or a BRDM-2 armoured reconnaissance car. An ordinary machine gun, in fact, yet even the South Africans feared it.

We had a village of dugout houses, three or four people in each. My own personal dugout cabin was jokingly called “Rezervado” – it was reserved specially for the three of us who lived there. This was when the cold weather set in. I made a doorframe in this dugout and we hung a blanket over it. Air still came through the chimney but we sealed this off, slept under three blankets and thus didn't mind the cold.

The temperature during my first year in Angola sometimes went down to one degree centigrade. We were actually on a plateau 1700 to 1800 metres above sea level. We moved around in winter jackets. The Angolans usually wore our Soviet military fur caps and tied the ribbons under their chins. It was a remarkable sight – black faces wearing Soviet fur caps, tied like that. Indeed, we were all dressed that way. But this icy cold usually only occurred in the evening and early morning. In the middle of the day, we'd be right up to between 25 and 30 degrees – great swings of temperature.

In the morning we had to go out wearing jackets. We wore the standard Angolan soldier's jacket, and underneath a vest with cartridges if necessary. What saved us from the cold was those jackets we wore and the fact that during the day the land was warmed up by the sun. And in the evening, usually we'd have some hot drinks if we could, followed by bed, but we definitely slept under three blankets.

Our daily work and way of life at the Pechora system was, of course, more or less regulated. During the Angolan winter between June and

August, as I've said, it was very cold and at night the temperature would fall to only one or two degrees above zero. We would walk around in Angolan parkas. Along with our dugouts there was a canteen, also in the pit in the ground, and we constructed a small bathhouse, even equipped with a steam room.

The food was so-so, basically tinned food from countries all over the world. Some of us couldn't eat that food (just think of being restricted to only tinned food for two whole years in Angola!) but others got used to it. Take Captain Sergey Rymar. He was a real glutton. He'd go through breakfast, lunch and dinner, and within an hour and a half he'd get hold of a tin of food, open it and start eating. I'd ask him, "Sergey, there is something I don't understand – just now you had lunch, so why are you feeding yourself again?" "You know," was his answer, "I need to eat..."

Sergey was one of the specialists at the Pechora complex who could adjust and repair anything with his eyes shut – the Angolans were very glad to work with him and appreciated him very much, especially as he could speak a little Portuguese. These Pechora people were, generally speaking, very well-matched jacks-of-all-trades. Someone assembled a radio receiver out of practically nothing and we could listen to Moscow, as crisp and clear as if it was broadcasting from the next dugout. We listened to all the radio stations: Voice of America, BBC and South African radio, everything.

The chief at Pechora was Col. Vladimir Nikolayevich Zinoviev. I have only good memories of that kind, responsive man. He was strict but fair and square. What's more, he knew how to work with the interpreters. He didn't hurry his speech and always repeated a phrase if something wasn't clear to the interpreter. It was a great pleasure to work with him. Every morning, he began by strapping his pistol to his side and doing his daily run. He did physical exercises, and so did some of our specialists (only when the war allowed, of course).

But these healthy habits would end once the cheap local home-made 'rice vodka' had matured, and our people began to drink and make merry. In fact, I became persuaded during two years in Angola that if we didn't get drunk from time to time, without a doubt we'd simply have gone crazy.

Some people's nerves would have given in and no wonder – a foreign country, a strange environment, the war and the bombardments. You give orders to the Angolans, they might fulfil them or not. The supply system doesn't work. Letters from home don't reach us. Well, nobody ever said things would be easy, so there had to be ways to relieve our personal stress.

This rice vodka was made from rice left over after meals. It was fermented, sugar was added, and vodka too if there was any. Then we took an ordinary army canister, about nine litres, filled it with that liquid, corked it and left it in the sun for three or four days. It was over 40 per cent proof. Once, while I was working in the Pechora complex, the Luanda higher command began to provide us with grape juice. We drank it once or twice but then Sergey Rymar spoke up. "What are we doing? Let's distil home-made hooch from this," he said. We just stared. "Well, these are grapes, after all! What are we talking about? Hand over the canister of grape juice, the sugar and the yeast. Don't worry, everything will be all right!"

In fact, the first attempt failed because the plastic canister exploded. Sergey apologised; it should have been done another way. And the second time, when we used a *metal* canister, we said, "Sergey, you're a master after all." His juice was also more than 40 per cent proof.

Besides being an interpreter I also became a logistics officer for the Pechora. I supplied food products and something sweet and tasty when possible. I provided our specialists with uniforms and boots, all kinds of toiletries and other things. I tried to alleviate the hardships of our life out there.

I must say that the Angolans were so unsuitable for war, I don't really want to speak about it. Not only were they afraid to take part in combat, they didn't even want to follow the reasonable advice of our advisers. Horror is understandable: we are all people, not robots! But *please*, fulfil the orders of your superiors; follow the advice of the advisers, and, what's more, the requirements of the field manuals. The Angolans had no desire to do this.

Why do I speak this way? All the Angolans of the military mission in Cuito Cuanavale had known me during these six months as "Señor

Geronimo". That was my *nom de guerre*. It began by accident in 1986. One of the Angolans couldn't pronounce "Igor", however much he tried. But he did manage "Geronimo"! The other blacks liked this and they asked me if I didn't object. I was somewhat taken aback by the coincidence – I was very fond of American Indians – and agreed. From then on, I was practically always introduced to strangers as Geronimo, although I also gave them my real name. Strangers paused with pleasure at "Geronimo" and almost all the military attachés I work with nowadays still know me as that.

I'll tell you why they all knew me. The first time I organised the assistant guard for the perimeter of our dugout camp at Cuito Cuanavale, I went out to check on the sentries. This was at the time of the battle of Cuito. What disturbed me most of all was that, even though it was night, the moon was shining brightly and illuminating the land. The time was roughly 2 a.m. An Angolan soldier was standing at his post with a sub-machine-gun in his hands (because they didn't have straps for their guns and had to hold them instead). This guard was standing there, holding his Kalashnikov, fast asleep. He was just standing there, not even leaning against a tree. At first I wondered, well, can it be that I am a fool, that there's something I don't understand?

I shouted at him as usual: "*Guarda!*" ("Sentry!") To this, he was supposed to reply, "*Assessor? Sim, pronto.*" ("Adviser? Yes, I am ready") Instead, there was no answer. I thought to myself, all right, I'll move closer. "*Guarda!*" Again, no reply. I positioned myself straight in front of him, as close as I could. I seized his Kalashnikov with one hand and struck his jaw with its butt. He fell down; his Kalashnikov remained in my hands. I asked him, "Are you perhaps asleep?" Then he answered, "No, I am not asleep." I called him a bloody swine and just kicked his legs.

That's why everybody instantly remembered me and who this Señor Geronimo was. When it was my turn to serve as a duty officer, Angolans asked, "Is this or isn't this Geronimo?" If yes, well then "we're finished, the end of the world!" And sure enough, when I went to check up on the sentries later on, everybody replied instantly.

After that, Col. Velichko of the 6th military district said to Col. Zinoviev: "That interpreter of yours, Zhdarkin, struck the face of our

guard, who then lodged a complaint.” So then I asked Zinoviev to go to Velichko and subsequently they relieved me of that duty.

I told Zinoviev I wouldn’t accept that duty any longer. Why? I simply didn’t want to. “But if you wish me to continue to strike their faces, please be assured that I’m quite ready to continue, without any doubt.”

“No, Igor, it’s not allowed,” he replied.

“Not allowed? Well, I’ll strike them anyhow. Why? Because these Angolans don’t carry out even the simplest of our directives, and violate the most elementary military regulations and demands. What do you expect our relations to be with such an undisciplined, cheeky lot? As they say, I’m not usually all that warlike even if something troubles me, even if I feel hurt. But this is our security and our lives depend on it! Isn’t that right? And I hope you don’t want more such problems.”

I added, “Vladimir Nikolayevich, don’t be upset. I’ll take care of any remaining problems. You won’t have to worry about anything. I’ll provide our group with all they need [because I was also busy being a logistics officer and in charge of the kitchen – I composed all the menus for our group of ten Soviet specialists at the Pechora anti-aircraft brigade]. But you must help: release me from all this shit, these stupid and senseless orders.” And indeed, he did release me.

From the very start we had to retrain the Angolans who were protecting the advisers and specialists of the Pechora brigade. They had somewhat lost discipline. Sometime after I joined the Pechora brigade I spoke with the chief of our guards, an Angolan sergeant, and told him I’d provide them with literally everything, but on a ‘carrot and stick’ principle. “By carrot I mean that you will be provided with all the necessary things. As to the stick, if you, God forbid, disobey me or any of the specialists and fail to execute our orders, you’ll be in real trouble. Discipline is most important!”

I also told them that, wherever the Soviet specialists went, they should be accompanied by four fully armed guards equipped with the appropriate webbing for keeping cartridges and grenades, sub-machine-guns and bayonets to ensure security on the way.

I started training them. They had good bayonets, the old long ones from the Kalashnikov (not the small ones used at present) that could also

be hurled. I gathered a team of eight Angolans and taught them how to throw bayonets, and a bit about hand-to-hand fighting and firing with their sub-machine-guns. We took empty cans, went to the forest for target practice at a distance of 100 metres. At first it was very bad, they couldn't fire, couldn't throw bayonets ... But gradually, step by step, they succeeded and suddenly they realised that they could do all this. How proud they were, you know. They straightened their shoulders, their eyes shone with confidence, it was a real pleasure to look at them.

One of our Angolan guards was a cook; another cleared the table and washed the dishes. They were responsible for order and cleanliness in the kitchen, and the food for eating. Jointly with them I made up the list of foodstuffs available in our 'warehouse'. They registered all items by receipt, consumption, unplanned expenses and so on. Our cook kept strict account of what we did and didn't have. He'd report to me how many cans of various foodstuffs were left.

On weekdays we used potatoes only for soup. The cook peeled potatoes, showed them to me and used them for soup. Only at weekends could we afford mashed or fried potatoes or anything of the kind. We also kept hens, which laid eggs for us, and we had one rooster that looked very pleased with itself, since it was the only one around, master of all the hens. So we could have fried eggs for breakfast or dinner at weekends. One of the hens lived in Slava Barabulya's dugout; it felt very comfortable there and regularly provided us with eggs. Slava was mostly serving in the infantry, but quite often came to have meals in our canteen and brought those eggs with him. Nobody objected – quite the opposite: we were all glad when he came.

I was in charge of all that, as head of the kitchen. Vladimir Nikolayevich didn't interfere at all, knowing I'd do everything properly. I compiled the menu and gave it to the cook, who was directly responsible for cooking the meals. In addition I went to Angolan warehouses to grub about for foodstuffs, clothes, articles of daily use, all that.

One day Sasha Sergeyev, our military district interpreter, told me: "Igor, by the way, they delivered fish."

"What fish are you talking about?" I asked.

"They've brought fresh-frozen fish from Namibe, from the ocean," he replied. Suddenly an idea began to form in my mind.

I hurried over to the logistics control point. When I arrived, one of the chief logistics officers said, "Geronimo, do you want fresh-frozen fish? It's just arrived from Namibe, from the coast."

"How much will you give me?"

"I can allot 20 kilograms to you."

My hat! Twenty kilograms mean four large blocks of fresh-frozen fish. And he's ready to allot it to me!

"And what else have you got?"

"Nothing else so far."

"Let me know if you get anything more."

"No problem."

That's it. We got into the truck and headed for the warehouse. An Angolan man opened a big green container. I gave him a piece of paper from the logistics officer and asked for 20 kilograms of fish. The guards who accompanied me to the warehouse collected it. I was about to leave the container when one of my guards quietly poked me in the ribs: "*Assessor*, look!" I turned around and saw a big piece of meat half a metre by half a metre in a remote corner.

Well, I didn't understand. "What's that?" I asked.

The warehouse man answered, "Meat."

I said, "Shoot this piece of meat to me, old fellow."

"No. This is the military district commander's reserve." Clearly he was worried that he'd given me that information.

"Please cut just a small piece for me. We've been eating only canned stewed meat for God knows how long and we're sick and tired of it."

"I can't," the Angolan sighed.

All of a sudden, shelling started. Shells exploded not more than 200 metres from us. The guy was scared: "That's all, I'm closing the container."

But I said, "Before that, please cut a piece of meat for me."

"I can cut you just a small piece, but you know it will take a lot of time. I've sent my man to pick up a knife but he apparently went to the dugout when shelling started." And the shelling became more intense, shells were

exploding and the warehouse man became more and more nervous.

I tackled him again: “Give the meat to us, we’ll be very grateful to you” (and I didn’t let him close the door of the container).

“I can’t, I’ve sent my man for a knife. He’ll soon be back with the knife.”

In short, when several shells exploded very close to us, he almost screamed, “Okay – take this meat!”

I signalled to my guards, who grabbed the meat and we ran for the truck. We returned to our place with our procurement. The perishable products were kept in a huge refrigerator, which was severely dented with shell splinters during shelling and was only just working, but it somehow kept the food cool.

So, when we arrived, Vladimir Nikolayevich approached the truck and looked inside: “What else have you brought? And what’s that?”

“Why, that’s meat.”

“Well, not bad!” But he never found out where we got it from.

So, after ages of canned food, we finally enjoyed fish and meat. Unfortunately these were the rare exceptions.

Living with death

In 1987, Operation “Saluting October” commenced and the Angolan forces started crushing UNITA; the purpose was to capture Mavinga, one of the UNITA strongholds. It’s difficult to explain what made the FAPLA fighters feel such rage against UNITA just then, but there were many cases where prisoners were just not taken, among them wounded UNITA warriors. Worse, cartridges weren’t even spent on them – they were killed with spades. Several times our Soviet specialists managed to save prisoners by literally wresting them from the grasp of enraged Angolans. Later on these UNITA fighters were transported in one of our APCs and sat tight, very afraid of being murdered.

We were all given bulletproof vests and were instructed to keep them safe. Not primarily to protect us but rather that we should protect them because losing a bulletproof vest meant a penalty of 250 dollars. Although they were very expensive, if you were killed by shrapnel hitting your head, for example, what good was the bulletproof vest you were

wearing! So, everyone in a military operation – even if he was dressed in a bulletproof vest all buttoned up according to plan – believed very little in its effectiveness. Our advisers in the 47th brigade carried their vests with them during a retreat, simply to avoid having to pay 250 dollars if they got lost. Our lads of course wanted to save their lives but had to carry their bulletproof vests with them all the way.

At the time we were young interpreters, unmarried, and sometimes we committed stupid blunders. On the other side of the Cuito River, the 25th brigade occupied defensive positions. From time to time, our officers would arrive to wash themselves, shave, wash clothes and so on. Afterwards they'd be transported back to their positions. Moving around like this, we did something very stupid. We moved along a small river until we reached the crossing. We did this while it was still night in order to escape bombardment, we rationalised, but in fact we went there to show off. Why? Because we knew that on that side of the river was the South African spotter who would now and then provide coordinates for a bombardment.

My sixth sense saved me once. One evening Sasha Sergeev, an interpreter, came to me. He invited me to go to the bridge with a group that had to cross. "Wait a minute while I fetch my sub-machine-gun," I said. I set out for my dugout, but something told me not to go, a sort of inner gut feeling. I stood still for a while and thought ... God only knows ... something isn't right!

I approached Sasha and he was already swearing. "One always has to wait for you!"

But I turned to him and said, "I'm not going."

"Why, Igor?"

What could I tell him? That I was listening to my inner voice? I said, "I just don't want to, that's all."

He looked at me attentively and said, "Then don't go." And he left.

The others set off for the bridge and at first everything was fine and they took our people across the river. But while they were sitting in a dugout their exposed car took a direct hit from a 155-mm shell. A shaken Sasha returned and said, "Oh hell! Do you know what happened out there?" He knew I'd had an inner warning.

Betrayal

A new operational officer of the 21st brigade was deployed when we were already on the defence covering Cuito Cuanavale, after all its reversals of fortune. He was always very courteous with us Soviets, several times invited us to small celebrations for this or that local anniversary, constantly consulted us on the most varied issues, demonstrated feverish activity and devotion to the revolutionary cause.

Yet, from the time of his arrival, a number of our groups fell into ambushes of UNITA and the South African forces. The South Africans also began to hit our positions much more accurately than before, as well as the command point of our brigade. On the whole, the impression arose that they were always relatively well informed about our movements and intentions. Generally, it appeared that this comrade was simply a traitor who informed the enemy about everything on the sly. His punishment was severe. He was taken away from our brigade and sent to the rear, somewhat farther away from the front.

When we handed over the coordinates of our 21st brigade to our command in Cuito, the South Africans began to hit our positions with greater precision. Being on the move all the time, on operations, we went from place to place. Whenever we occupied a fixed position, naturally we'd send our coordinates to the military district base. At first this was done by the Angolan brigade command, but they must have been inaccurate because, when the South Africans bombarded, the shells were off target – many overflowed or fell short. But then our Mikhailych took over. He was a careful man and, unlike the Angolans, he determined the coordinates and transmitted them precisely. There must have been traitors in the Cuito Cuanavale district who, after getting the coordinates, transmitted them to the enemy. With the more accurate figures, the South Africans began to hit our brigade more reliably. Of course, we discovered this very quickly. Mikhailych raised this issue at various levels and on several occasions, but no measures were taken to stop what was happening.

Local interactions

Some incidents show very clearly how we interacted with local people, like

the incident with the stew. We ate tinned stew for a very long time. It was supplied by plane and helicopter, came in jars of all sizes, and varied a lot. Some jars we called “dogs’ pleasure”. We’d open the packages, catch the disgusting smell, refuse to eat such muck and give it to our dogs. I suspect our dogs thought at the time: “What good guys these people are! They don’t eat meat themselves but give it to us.”

And sometimes we gave the stew to the Angolans too, if they asked us for it. It was ridiculous, because they also winced and said, “No, we won’t eat this shit but rather give it to our women.” Weird – they gave the food to their women.

I know all this first hand, having witnessed the whole thing. One of the Angolans guarding us had an attractive woman in a nearby village. Just then, we’d received this disgusting stew. It was packed in tall jars, several kilograms in each. It was pork from France. I opened one jar and there was a terrible smell. I didn’t know whether the pork was supposed to smell that way or whether it had simply gone bad. I called our guard: “Antonio, come here.” He took one whiff and groaned – he was nauseated.

“What can we do with this?” I asked him. He said he would just take it to his *mulher*, his woman.

“And she’ll take it?” I asked.

“Yes. What shit,” he added. “Bring the car, let’s go!”

We took 12 jars. I’d told him that we had received that amount. But he replied, “No, no! Not like this.”

“What do you mean – not like this?”

“There should only be six jars. But okay, put all 12 in the car, and I’ll just take six of them.”

It didn’t take long to reach the village. It was only 25 kilometres from Cuito. They were being bombarded with South African G-6 guns.

“Well, what are we going to do?” I asked Antonio. “I don’t want to stay around here!”

“What rubbish!” he exclaimed. “Just sit here in our dugout and I’ll go look for her.”

And indeed, what type of dugout could have been available in this village? It was in name only, it was a pit, and otherwise, nothing! I crawled

in and found a few Angolans sitting around and speaking unintelligibly.

They asked me, "Hey! Do you want a drink?"

I answered, "No! I wouldn't drink anything you have."

"No, no," they pleaded, "come on!" And they offered me their local *caporote*, home-made Angolan liquor.

I don't know how long Antonio was away for, with the six jars of stew – an hour and a half, two hours? All this time the bombardment continued. The other six jars were still in the car and while we were sitting in this dugout the Angolans asked me, "Did you come with meat?"

"I don't understand", I said.

"Well, you came with six jars of meat – don't you have six jars in the car?"

I answered, "No." But they insisted that indeed there were six jars of meat lying in the car. I was surprised, said I didn't understand and asked them what they wanted.

"We need a snack." And, sure as I'm telling you now, they insisted, "No problem, we'll do everything right away."

I said, "What will you do right away?"

"We'll be your assistants. Your friend doesn't know that his woman went to another village and right now he's running through all the villages but can't find her. So we'll simply tell him where she is, and in exchange you will give us so many jars of meat."

I answered: "Like hell I will! What I really need is Antonio, who right now is running through the villages."

But they countered: "Otherwise, you won't be able to make your way out of here alone."

I felt bloody horrible. Of course I had my sub-machine-gun with me, and enough ammunition, but at the same time I kept repeating to myself, "Otherwise, you won't be able to make your way out of here alone."

Well, I thought, now isn't this something! And, anyway, what's in it for me? So I said to them, "Fine, what do you need?"

And they answered, "There, in your car, are six jars of stew."

"And what about it?"

"Give it to us."

Knowing how much they loved to bargain, I offered them two or three jars at the most. But they stood their ground, insisting on all six. Again I countered, "Two to three jars, nothing more." And we went on haggling, for how long I can't remember.

Finally they said, "Well okay, three jars, and you can go wherever you want to."

"And where's the fellow I came with?" I asked.

"That shouldn't be of any concern to you since he'll be coming back soon."

Then I gave them three jars, saying: "That's the lot."

They reacted joyfully: "You're a splendid fellow. We know you, you're Geronimo and we admire you. So we'll see to it that no one disturbs you in your travels around here."

"And who indeed could disturb me?" I asked.

"Well, our block stations", was the answer. Those belonging to UNITA!

And I thought, to hell with you all, what's going on around here? But afterwards I found out. Very often, small UNITA columns would be moving around in the region of Cuito Cuanavale inside the zone controlled by FAPLA. They'd approach the FAPLA blockhouses, meet with the FAPLA soldiers, accept food from them and give them food as well. Why not? People want to eat and life is life!

And anyway, the locals had many relatives on both sides of the trenches, how could they kill each other? As the deputy commander for political affairs (both of the Angolans and our own) told me, it often happened that, within the same family, one son served in UNITA and the other in FAPLA – just as in Russia in our post-1917 civil war. The main difference was that the Angolans, unlike us, were less sensitive about these divided loyalties. As they say, "It happened. So, let it be!"

By the way, I investigated later and those villagers were right – I really was on my own. Although these people weren't controlled by UNITA, they nonetheless sometimes collaborated with them. The situation was roughly as follows: if UNITA doesn't move into the area, then FAPLA will. That means that the civilians try to stay neutral by cooperating with both sides. If UNITA comes around, the locals say, "Here's food for you, eat by

all means. No problem.”

Then, when FAPLA arrives, they accuse the villagers: “You supplied UNITA yesterday!”

“No, no,” the locals answer, “we didn’t supply them. But here, please eat now.”

They just put up with things realistically because they had to, including from us. There was a warrant officer in our team, his name was Pasha. He’d just spent two years in Afghanistan. When he got drunk, he’d fire shots between the legs of the Angolans. It was a classic performance. He’d come out of his dugout with his sub-machine-gun in his hand shouting, “Antonio, come here quickly – there is something to do out here.” If Antonio didn’t carry out his orders, Pasha would shoot directly between his legs – without further ado. They all knew he was a crack shot, he never actually hit anyone. Yet all the Angolans ran past him in terror. As a result, if he felt it was necessary to get something done right away, he always knew that it could be done.

Many times when we went to fetch water with the Engesa water-carrier I sat and watched from the top of the water cistern while Pasha fired off a burst and the Angolans would start running on the job. They all knew Pasha and that there were no questions once he’d spoken. For all that, they respected him and loved him very much. He was master of all trades, a real professional and also, as need be, he defended Angola and the Angolans with strength and determination!

Once we wanted to organise a party. As I was in charge of the kitchen, I brought some food and then went up to Pasha and told him, “Pasha, we have nothing to drink.”

Pasha answered, “There will be something to drink right away.”

I said, “It’s night outside. How?”

He went outside, sent a burst from his Kalashnikov into the air and shouted, “Antonio! *Caporote!*” – calling for the local liquor.

Antonio answered, “No, *assessor*.”

“What the hell do you mean ‘no’? Go and find some!”

And Antonio found and brought us the liquor and we enjoyed some drinks.

The local drink comes from a remarkable tree, producing *maboko* fruit. It's the size of two large apples. When it's green, nothing can break it open, not even an axe. But when it ripens, you can open it and eat the seed and become drunk. Especially in the 5th military district, in the province of Cunene, there were very large groves of them called *mabokairo*. The drink is called *canioma* or *caporote* depending on the province it comes from. If you want the really fine stuff, you must be there when the fruit is ripe.

Once during my first year in Angola, 1986–7, we went out looking for the local spirit in Huila Province – there it was known as *canioma*. We got into a UAZ jeep with sub-machine-guns and grenades and set off. Soon we arrived at a village where the elder approached us, armed with a spear. He was covered with feathers. We were accompanied by a Portuguese speaker who could also speak the local language – the villagers spoke no Portuguese. So I'd translate from Russian into Portuguese and he'd say it in their language.

The village elder said, "Aha, *canioma* – well, just drive in that direction over there." We drove on for ten minutes to the next village, where everybody already expected us. I don't know how they do it (tom-toms?) but when we arrived they were already coming out to greet us: "So you are looking for *canioma*?"

One of our Russian specialists was a great expert in all these drinks and he wanted to get first-class spirit. "No, we can't take any from here because the *canioma* here is poor," he said.

On we drove to the next village and the next and the next. I became worried and mentioned this to our senior adviser. "Excuse me, but doesn't it seem to you that we're being followed?"

"Huh? What a load of shit!" he replied.

I persisted. "Excuse me please, but I want to stay alive. I just want to survive. We've already visited several villages, and everywhere they were waiting for us. They already knew we were coming and everything about us. How? Doesn't this worry you?"

I noticed that the Angolans always greeted me first and only afterwards the other specialists. And then, at yet another village, I again became suspicious.

"No one right now is going to kill us?" I asked.

Our Angolan translator said to me: "Geronimo, no one will kill you. By now, everybody knows you."

But I was frightened. They knew me here, they'd already seen me more than once, and they knew that I spoke Portuguese and was an interpreter. "Ah, this is Geronimo, let him go!" In principle, they treated most of the interpreters this way and sometimes the specialists, particularly those who could speak Portuguese.

I asked him: "Excuse me, but what is the situation around here?"

"Is there something disturbing you? They may kill the others but not you, Geronimo," he said.

My jaw fell. "You understand, it's not necessary to kill them," I said.

"It's fine. If you say so, they won't kill them. But in any case, the fact remains that you have only twenty minutes to get out of here."

"Well," I exclaimed, "does that mean that until then we might manage to get a drink?"

"Yes," he said, "we can do that."

Those villagers told me openly that whenever I visited all would be fine and I shouldn't worry. I was, after all, Geronimo. Despite such reassurances, my balls dropped in terror.

"And what else?" I asked.

"Nothing, they know you after all. You speak Portuguese; you behave normally with the locals." And, in fact, I was able somehow to get along with them. But when we returned from this trip I got as drunk as a pig.

This is how I approached the locals. "Here I am, a so-called so-and-so," I'd tell them, "but you will behave politely with me." The Angolans understood that if I punished them it was because of something they'd messed up, not just on a personal whim. Besides, as I've already said, I made serious efforts to take care of them, to look after their general well-being and their food. In fact, none of them in my care ever went hungry. And fairly often I'd simply sit and chat with them about this and that. They were, after all, interested in my views and company.

As for the South Africans, in hindsight I don't want to say anything bad about them, first because they fought well, and second because many of

them were whites. I'm white myself, and the South Africans related to us as whites to whites. Strangest of all, the white Cubans would also say, "We, as they say, are ready to shake hands with the white South Africans." This could be ascribed to racism too. But, after all, the blacks from both sides also related to each other in the same way. Besides, we were all soldiers and fulfilled our duties.

Some people criticised me for saying this in my book of memoirs. But put it simply: is it a crime that I belong to the white race and many South Africans were whites too? Am I responsible for their desire to relate to us as whites to whites?

By the way, I met South Africans from the Angolan war later on, both whites and blacks, during my service in Mozambique and again in Angola (during my UN missions) and everything was all right. If we met in battle, no question, we'd kill each other. War's war and there's no need to discuss the rules. You see, the politicians begin the wars and we were just soldiers fulfilling orders, nothing more! The South Africans and I understood this very well.

Recognition for a job well done

What was the recognition our specialists received? It must be made clear that our specialists not only instructed the Angolans but themselves participated on Angolan territory in military activities against UNITA bandits and against the South African forces. It must have been a very interesting bureaucratic problem – how to gauge the accomplishments of our brothers-in-arms under various circumstances.

How, for example, would you judge the actions of one of our senior lieutenants who became a captain at Cuito Cuanavale? He was a maintenance specialist on tanks, armoured personnel carriers, armoured cars, and armoured reconnaissance patrol cars. A quiet, unassuming fellow. His name was Valentin Mozolev. The Angolans were simply crazy about him. War or no war, bombardment or no bombardment, if it was necessary to repair the tanks, he went to repair them. He would crawl inside a tank as bombardment began – shells exploding and shrapnel cracking and popping all around – but he'd go on repairing the tank.

The Angolans, watching him working under these conditions, then also began to do repair work. More than half the equipment repaired at Cuito Cuanavale was thanks to Mozolev.

He didn't hurl missiles from defensive positions or rush ahead with a flag or summon his troops to attack, he simply repaired equipment. Our regional command decided to recommend the 'For Service to the Motherland' decoration for him. In my opinion, he deserved it – he carried on with his tasks under any circumstances whatsoever. But the standard answer to this recommendation was: "Describe one heroic deed committed by the comrade." How on earth can one describe what he did? After all, just what type of heroic deed were they looking for? What nonsense! He repaired broken-down materiel, which people then engaged the enemy with!

"Describe in more detail the deed committed by this comrade!" This type of formal query came from Moscow. Many times our command in Angola received questionnaires concerning direct participants in a given operation or military activities with the question: "For what should he be decorated?" Mozolev didn't blow up three South African tanks, for example. People simply shrugged their shoulders and said, "Okay, let others wear our decorations."

People sitting back in Luanda and the military districts' headquarters got awards and decorations for "bravery and courage during fierce battles in the rear". It always happens like this; those who sit at staff headquarters and at the home front are the ones that usually get the recognition. This is the misfortune of all armies, all states, all wars and all centuries. Those in the front lines are forgotten, perhaps not because of their lack of achievement but rather that at the time of their achievements they didn't shout about it, they just got on with their duties. "Without paper you are nothing, and only with paper you are somebody!" says a well-known proverb. If you received a document proving your participation in the war, isn't that enough? Don't you already have your official daily privileges that go with this document? Orders? Medals? There's nothing about your "heroic deed" on paper – no medals for you!

I had a similar experience with my own decorations. The chief adviser

of our brigade recommended me for the decoration ‘Order of the Red Star’. Nothing! Then he recommended me for the medal, ‘For Meritorious Combat’. Nothing again. Only later, thanks to our chief interpreter in Luanda, did I receive a ‘For Meritorious Combat’ medal.

Piotr Ivanovsky also didn’t receive decorations. He was recommended for the ‘Order of the Red Star’ and then for the ‘For Meritorious Combat’ medal. Nothing came of it at all! It was the same with Slava Barabulya. They recommended him several times for this medal and, again, only thanks to our chief interpreter did he finally get it. Anatoly Alekseevsky went through a mountain of shit, got into a great number of scrapes, broke out of enemy encirclement, and it was just the same: not worthy of decoration. Serguey Demidchik served in Cuito Cuanavale, survived a pretty mess during the hellish events of 1987: not worthy ...

We were blocked because Gen. Gusev, the chief military adviser to the Angolan minister of defence, cut to pieces any list of decorations involving the interpreters. If the request for decoration concerned a young lieutenant, an interpreter, it automatically meant he wasn’t worth considering even though he was only a boy when he’d sat through sieges, been without food and narrowly missed getting seriously wounded or sick.

And Gusev’s point of view was his alone. There was the case of an interpreter who’d also served in a military district and participated in combat. He flew in a Cuban helicopter that was shot down. Two Soviet advisers were with him, as well as SWAPO fighters and Angolans. While trying to land the stricken craft, some Angolans jumped out. The rest crashed with the helicopter. Everybody suffered trauma and injury but, thank God, didn’t die. Both advisers received decorations. They were guys with two years’ service in the war.

Well, these advisers turned to the guy who’d also been an interpreter and said, “We are going to recommend you for a medal – maybe we’ll succeed. After all, we’re a couple of lieutenant-colonels while you’re only a lieutenant.” After they recommended him he arrived in Luanda and was told to just fuck off. “What? A medal for an interpreter? And what type of heroic deed exactly did he do?”

What type of heroic deed? He flew in the helicopter and crashed in

the same helicopter together with all the others who survived. The others received decorations, justifiably so, while he received nothing.

As for me, they conveyed the message that, according to Gen. Gusev's instructions, Soviets who had received a Cuban medal for participating in the battle of Cuito Cuanavale weren't allowed any additional Soviet military decorations. This included advisers and specialists as well as interpreters.

Nor did they give any decorations to my friend Oleg Gritsuk even though he too had wasted two years in the jungle. What happened to him also happened to me. He was recommended twice for the 'Order of the Red Star' and then for the medal 'For Meritorious Combat'. Again nothing! "You received a Cuban medal for the defence of Cuito Cuanavale. Well, that's enough for you. Go home, thank you!" After such words we simply shrugged our shoulders and set off for home.

When the Cubans began distributing medals for Cuito Cuanavale our leaders came from Luanda and took 17 of them for themselves, allegedly for those who had served for long in Cuito but had been transferred to other districts. They also gave out medals to those who had beaten the table with their fists, shouting, "Give us our decorations!"

They got other medals too, I think. And there was another Cuban medal, 'Servicio Distinguido' (For Distinguished Service), that was being dished out to soldiers for having completed their international tour of duty. Plus an Angolan medal in the category 'For Outstanding Service' attached to small ribbons and like our Soviet five-kopek piece in size. Again we failed to understand why some people in Cuito Cuanavale were decorated with these Angolan medals. "What for?" we asked. Strangest of all, those who were decorated didn't know why they'd received them either.

The Cuban medals for Cuito Cuanavale turned into a big affair. The Cubans struck them to decorate their own men who participated in the defence of Cuito as well as for Soviet and Angolan participants in 1988. The Cubans, in this scheme, were of course great guys. The plane carrying the medals arrived in Luanda. In Luanda, however, none of the Soviet advisers was alerted to this. So the plane headed for Cuito Cuanavale. The Cubans phoned us via our special line and my friend Slava Barabulya

talked with them. They asked for our list of people who had participated in defending Cuito Cuanavale. "Even if they'd only been there one month, they have a right to be decorated. They have been under bombardment."

Slava came over to me and asked, "Igor, how shall we go about all this?"

"Well, I don't know," I said. "Let's go to the 'Cubashi' (as we called them) and discuss everything with them."

He replied, "Well, okay, fine. I'll come back soon."

Slava went to his chief. We lived in one camp – our dugouts were all together. His chief was Col. Velichko, chief military adviser of the commander of the 6th military district. Velichko had been there for one and a half months. Under him was a deputy, Col. Mityaev, a paratrooper who had participated in the events at Cuito Cuanavale. At that time there were many new people in our camp who hadn't fought. Almost half the people who had actually participated in combat had already left because military activities had supposedly ended.

As soon as Velichko heard about Slava's conversation with the Cubans, he telegraphed Luanda about the arrival of the medals at Cuito Cuanavale. In Luanda they were surprised because the Cubans hadn't told them anything about this. And literally within forty minutes the list arrived of the leading defenders of Cuito Cuanavale.

It began with Lt.-Gen. Gusev and Maj.-Gen. Ryabchenko, followed by Col. Mishchenko, secretary of the Party organisation for all Angola. He received the Order of the Red Star, as well as the order of 'For Service to the Motherland'. As we joked later, these were awarded to him firstly in acknowledgement of his flying from Menongue to Cuito Cuanavale without a parachute, and secondly for his active participation in an anti-alcohol propaganda campaign (he'd declared at a meeting in Luanda that our specialists in war-torn districts shouldn't receive any beer because it diminished their ability to fight).

I don't want to defame the man, but Col. Mishchenko certainly didn't distinguish himself when he flew into Cuito Cuanavale just as UNITA soldiers started to bombard Cuito in September 1987. The shells exploded over the airport while the other areas of Cuito were unaffected. So everybody was left undisturbed to go about their own affairs. Mishchenko,

however, remained in his dugout the whole day. Our people tried to calm him: “Comrade Colonel, don’t get agitated. You are okay, the shells have shot over target, for God’s sake.” But he answered, “No, no, I still have work to do here.” He sat down, as if to write something. (“Well, all right then, sit down and write,” they thought.) Towards evening the shelling quietened down, and only then did Mishchenko emerge from the dugout. And this man was to get a medal.

When Slava arrived with Velichko, the Cubans looked at the list of those Luanda Soviet soldiers to be decorated.

“Well, who here is on this list?” they asked.

“Lt.-Gen. Gusev.”

“Who’s he?”

“He is our chief military adviser in Angola.”

“And how was he able to participate here at Cuito?”

“Well, he arrived and stuck his leg out of the helicopter. He gave orders and basically took charge.”

“No, strike him out. Secondly, Maj.-Gen. Ryabchenko. And how did he take part?”

“Well, he also flew in and commanded something here.”

“And how long did he command?”

“From morning to midday.”

“No, strike him out.”

“Col. Mishchenko, who is he?”

“He’s the secretary of the Party organisation of all Angola.”

“And on which flank did he take part in the defence of Cuito Cuanavale?”

“Well, he arrived, took a look at the warlike atmosphere and made a speech.”

“Unnecessary to decorate him.”

Our command from Luanda had sent a list of 17 people to the Cubans. From this list, the Cubans authorised five! Among these, by the way, were two of our translators – Oleg Kozak and Sasha Kalan. The remaining three were former advisers in the 59th and 25th brigades.

What happened later? Gen. Gusev flew in, as well as Gen. Ryabchenko

and Col. Mishchenko. Together, they took away 17 decorations. They made speeches. They said, "Guys, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts. You are a great bunch," and then left. The Cubans stayed, mouths wide open in surprise.

What is not at all clear is whether they brazenly took these decorations for themselves or whether they had made prior arrangements with the Cubans. But they took the decorations because they were generals. That's all there is to it. It would seem as if they appropriated those 17 decorations for themselves.

One day, 4 April 1988, was specifically devoted to the decoration of the Soviet specialists (these skilled cadres were later featured in a Cuban film about the defence of Cuito Cuanavale). All the senior officers and generals arrived for the ceremony, which duly took place, but who were we, after all? I was a young lieutenant, so how could I yell, "Who are you and what did you do to achieve all this?" I only know that two of the specialists authorised to receive medals from the Cubans, Oleg Kozak and Sasha Kalan, didn't get their decorations. Sasha had been in the 16th brigade that was cut to pieces during the Cuito Cuanavale battle. After this horrific encounter, only two tanks and 100 men out of the whole brigade returned from their passage through Shambinga. For this, Sasha Kalan received nothing.

Now I want to refer to the system of payment. After fulfilling their international obligations by transferring their knowledge and providing training for the Angolan forces, people apparently still expected to earn money. I consider this was fair, because, if you please, to live in such circumstances, which were completely alien to us in respect of climate, disease, war and so forth, and to do all this for virtually no particular reason – well, this was just unrealistic! After all, Americans and Europeans were paid well for the same type of conditions and work, and in terms of the exchange rate at the time we knew that these Western specialists earned five to six times as much as we did. On the other hand, compared with conditions in the USSR, we did receive a lot and were considered rich by Soviet standards, by those people who never went abroad.

And there was an interesting point – if you came without a wife, you

would receive only 80 per cent of your salary in basic pay (in “chits”) and the outstanding 20 per cent in traveller’s cheques (“road chits”). As they said jokingly about women, they also worked – they earned the other 20 per cent, saving money for their husbands. Actually, whether your wife was with you or not, if you served in a brigade that was actually fighting then you were paid in full – but only if you were an adviser or a specialist. Interpreters, even in the thick of battle, only got 80 per cent thanks to some mythical order numbered D-54. That’s all we could ever find out.

You had to sign each cheque but you didn’t have the right to use them. For that, you had to take them back to Moscow, to somewhere like the office of the Hotel Ukraine, and convert them into Soviet roubles on a one-to-one basis. I earned some 1500 to 1600 chits per month, a lot of money in Soviet days. Our advisers received up to 2000.

It wasn’t only the purely military interpreters who served in Angola – I mean it wasn’t only the graduates of the Military Institute of Foreign Languages of the USSR ministry of defence. A lot of so-called two-year officers from the civilian institutes of foreign languages served in Angola too. They were from Moscow and Leningrad, Minsk and Kiev and other cities. Under USSR law they were called on active military duty for two years and then retired, if they didn’t want to continue their military careers.

They were good fellows and most of them were skilled interpreters. I’d like to name in particular Maxim Gladkov, Andrey Sobolev, Alexander Shapkin, Alexander Tikhomirov. Oleg Gritsuk, Serguey Demidchik, Andrey Khatkevitch, Serguey Eroshov and Alexander Shtookin. I was really happy to work and serve with guys like them.

The Cubans

In Angola there were 55 000 Cubans. In the south alone, there were about 40 000 of them. There, together with the Namibians and Angolans, they concentrated their technicians and troops in the district of Cunene and deployed 1500 T-54, T-55 and T-62 tanks in this area. After the battle near the Namibian border, the South Africans sued for peace.²⁹

The South African Air Force could not overcome our – more precisely the Cuban – reinforced anti-aircraft defences. The Cubans also began

using MiG-23 fighter aircraft as well as SU-22s, very much state-of-the-art aircraft for those conditions. And anyway, a peace agreement was signed at the end of 1988.

I certainly wouldn't be sitting here if it weren't for the Cubans. And I wouldn't be sitting here if the Cubans hadn't supplied us. Thirdly, I wouldn't be sitting here if the Cubans hadn't fought for Angola. And when the Cubans withdrew from Angola in 1990, the government of Angola gave each of their officers a fan as a gift. What a thing!

As for the Cuban soldiers, they received nothing. What a fraud! It was such an inconsiderate attitude towards the Cubans, who, it is said, had lost some 15 000 men killed, wounded or missing, and of whom upwards of 2300 died. At the time of the withdrawal of the Cuban armies from Angola, my friend, a Cuban major, got a fan for his service in the country!

The reasons for the Angolan defeat back in 1987 can be debated for a long time. The Soviet military advisers (in particular Generals Gusev and Ryabchenko) conducted this operation ably. At first everything worked out beautifully. But the problem was that they planned the campaign in the way they were accustomed to, for Soviet soldiers. A Soviet soldier would have carried it out. But these were Angolans. Cubans or our own soldiers would have accepted and carried out the plan without any problem. But as rumours said, the Cubans told our generals, "Wait, what are you doing, who are you relying on? You'll have to bank on these Angolan soldiers to do the job."

Well, our officers had already provided a time frame to fulfil certain objectives by a certain date, to depart on that day at this time for such-and-such a line. This was, of course, pure fantasy. The Cubans warned us, but our advisers did not listen. The Angolan army at that stage was already strong enough to execute its tasks, well prepared and, with the help of Soviet specialists, well supplied with military technology and weaponry. Despite all the blunders in training its staff, the Angolans were prepared to fight, could fight (and actually did fight) quite successfully against UNITA, so the Angolan army's morale was sufficiently high. At the start of the operation, there was even a moment when it seemed as if UNITA was on the edge of defeat. With a little more effort, an Angolan

victory could have been close. But then the South African army became involved. The Angolans were afraid to fight against them and were not particularly able to do so. The “Buffalo” battalion in general roused them to near-panic, though when we found ourselves encircled the Angolans were able to satisfy themselves that the “Buffalo” soldiers were, after all, not invincible.

As for the Cubans, they fought very competently in Angola. In practice, they mistrusted what the Angolan intelligence service said, organised their own special units using mostly Cuban black soldiers to patrol the jungles and savannahs and gather information, and with their deep reconnaissance units collected data from the remote interior and from the rear of the enemy.

The Angolans also had their own deep reconnaissance units. One was with the 29th brigade at Soyo in the north, where they trained these specialist troops. They moved out to the rear of the enemy, including UNITA and the South African forces, to carry out their assignments and get information.

Since the Cubans didn’t trust the Angolans and did all their business on their own, the only organisation that the Cubans had much contact with was SWAPO. The Cubans maintained close relations with SWAPO and conducted joint operations.

Our Soviets advisers were also with SWAPO and regarded them very highly for their training and their efforts to learn the skills of warfare, their readiness to execute instructions and their ability to fulfil orders. For example, SWAPO militants had to blow up a bridge on Namibian territory.³⁰ They went and blew up the bridge. On the way back, the group found an ammunition dump. They blew it up, took possession of a Racal portable radio receiver and brought back other apparatus that they could use later on. They did all this without having to be told by anyone, showing great initiative.

There was a big training centre for SWAPO near Lubango, where our own advisers and specialists also worked. I have only praise for the SWAPO fighters. I met them many times and often worked with them. SWAPO training and spirit were way better than that of the Angolan forces. It

was a simple fact that the SWAPO fighters very seldom let themselves be captured – only if they were badly wounded or suffered shell shock. Usually, if SWAPO fighters died, they did so together with several South Africans. And the UNITA troops were simply afraid of SWAPO.

The Cubans sent their special forces to the rear of UNITA and the South Africans to blow up their ammunition dump and gather specific information. On their return they were mostly worn out and it was clear that they had had to walk sometimes up to 100 kilometres or until a helicopter picked them up. They just managed under their own steam.

They reported that more than once they'd met with American special forces.³¹ Their paths would happen to cross in the bush. They'd greet each other peacefully and wave as they went. For the special forces of any nation, there's an unwritten law: if they meet the special forces of the enemy, and if their commander throws away all his weapons and attacks the enemy armed only with a bayonet or an engineering shovel, then his group and the enemy will do the same. If anyone fires a single shot, even from a pistol, then his group must leave the field of battle in disgrace. This was a distinct rule.

The American operators were well equipped but weak in morale. We heard one interesting story. Nine black Cubans, all taught by Soviet instructors, were on an operation when they ran into 20 American operators. These Americans behaved rudely, figuring that they could easily prevail over the Cubans, and hand-to-hand combat broke out with bayonets and shovels. The few surviving Americans soon ran away, while the Cubans, to a man, though wounded, emerged victorious. Time and again, the Cubans proved their worth as fighters. Without them Angola would have perished long ago, because the Cubans followed one order above all others: "Fidel Castro willed it", and that was it.

I've got a recording of Fidel Castro from a press conference I attended at the Cuban embassy in 1989. He was a first-class speaker, and this is what he said, word for word: "In this battle of 11 March 1988 at Cuito Cuanavale, the South African Air Force was not able to operate because of exceptionally bad weather conditions. But, on the other hand, South African tanks flew in the air." Beautifully put! He was referring to the

attack when four South African Olifant tanks were blown up by mines, one after the other. The Cubans turned the four tanks into flat-bread and dragged a fifth one over to our side.

The Cubans really were powerful allies of ours when it came to dealing with enemy intelligence. In the Angolan army there were many traitors transmitting information to UNITA. Well, it's enough to say that the first cousin of Pedro Antonio Tonha "Pedale", the Angolan minister of defence, was working in the office of the UNITA chief of staff. And in our 21st brigade, the Angolan operational officer was a traitor. We saw through him within two weeks but by then UNITA and the South Africans knew practically everything about the Angolan units, their movements, weapons, fighting morale, plans and tasks. Leaks of information were always a problem.

Take the matter of minefields. If an Angolan brigade went on the defensive, then naturally it mined the fields in front of it. The maps of these minefields very often turned up in the hands of the enemy, so the South Africans could move through them pretty easily and attack the Angolan brigades. Then the Cubans involved themselves in this, also mining the fields, while their maps gave other, false, indications. The South Africans calmly moved on, thinking that the Cubans had cleared the area of mines, and – *bang!* The Cubans succeeded in seizing a South African video of a battle on 11 March 1988. It shows the South Africans moving in their tanks, playing on harmonicas. Suddenly, one after the other, the tanks are blown up and fly into the air. The South African cameraman didn't even get to switch off his camera. It was all there on film.

After it was realised that maps of minefields were finding their way into the hands of the enemy, the Cubans persuaded our advisers to have the Angolan brigades operate closely with them and the Cuban advisers. Things turned out well after this shift. In the first place, the Cubans did not have the tolerance we did. We tried to persuade them and exhorted: "Yes, please, you must do such and such." The Cubans simply said, "If you don't do it, you'll be punished," and the culprit would be punished there and then. I don't want to suggest that the Cubans assaulted Angolan troops – the Cubans were great fellows – but the Spanish language is

very similar to Portuguese, after all, so they were able to point out to the Angolans exactly what wasn't done right, and after that they could punish the Angolans appropriately.

With the Cubans, everything was clearly organised. Cuban helicopters came to us in Cuito Cuanavale delivering equipment, produce, cigarettes, writing materials and groups of replacement soldiers. Of course, a crowd collected right away. When the helicopter was about to fly back, the Cubans had first place in it and, then in turn, the wounded and sick Cubans, Soviets and Angolans. Then they took their own troops and, of course, the Soviets. Only after this, and if there was still space left on the helicopter, did they take the Angolans who weren't sick or wounded. A huge Cuban stood at the entrance of the helicopter and if there was any problem he 'used force'. Some of our advisers used to say, "Why do you act like this?" The perplexed Cuban would look at them and reply, "What else? Tell me how, and I'll do it."

Besides, the Cubans ran their affairs in a very open manner and reprimanded the Angolans severely if their tasks were not completed satisfactorily. Apparently Cubans sometimes participated directly with the Angolan general staff in working out their operations. There and then, on the job, they showed the Angolans how one ought or ought not to do something, and also persuaded our own Soviet advisers to adapt to the local conditions. "Adapt yourselves to the cadres you work with and don't judge the situation as if you were in the Soviet Union" was their advice.

The Cubans were our brothers. We got to know their officers well, they sometimes invited us for drinks. They considered themselves lucky simply to render us assistance.

Any official holiday in Angola presented us with interesting moments, for example on 1 and 9 May, 23 February and 7 November. On such days we Soviets would receive orders from our high command to increase our vigilance, avoid liquor, post sentries and occupy defensive positions.

On days like this the Cubans regularly received liquor – ordinary liquor, not home-made hot drinks. Very little rum was actually seen, it was mostly whisky. I tell you, their bottles came by the litre, and every four soldiers received a one-litre bottle to greet the day. This was for the soldiers,

not only the officers! Well, the Cuban tactical group certainly proved themselves. Come a holiday, everything was put in order – the sentries were at their posts – and then a bottle for every four soldiers arrived. If more was delivered, a litre bottle went to every two soldiers. Often, as we sat in the dining room, we would hear a vehicle arrive accompanied by uneven footsteps, indicating that the Cubans had already been celebrating.

“Geronimo!”

“It’s me – why?”

“Do you want to drink?”

I’d answer, “And what’s this?”

“They sent us whisky.” The Cubans were well aware of our Soviet ‘problems’ with liquor, “Yes, we know all about your Soviet rubbish.”

One Cuban usually made fun of me, saying, “Once again a telegram’s arrived urging you to raise your vigilance?”

“Yes, it has come.”

“Now let’s raise – our glasses!” And he’d slam a bottle down onto the table.

What could I say? “Well, a bloody agent provocateur.”

This was how things were – we lived in harmony with the Cubans. They were always happy to help. I went to them for foodstuffs, for uniforms, to watch a video or just as a guest. They were always glad to see us, and if we needed their assistance – “no problem, *Sovietico!*”

I remember once we ran out of flour. Well, we opened some special forces’ ration kits to use crackers instead of bread. Sure, crackers are a good thing but, still, to eat without bread was rather sad. The Angolan warehouses also ran out of flour. What could we do? I told Vladimir Nikolayevich: “I can go to the Cubans, maybe they have some flour.”

“Well,” he replied, “it’s a little bit awkward, asking them for flour.”

I answered, “I won’t get tough, but in the end we must support each other.”

“Well, I don’t know, Igor, I leave it to your discretion. As they say, it’s at your own risk.”

So we drove there in our UAZ together with Tolya Semenikhin, our major from Pechora. As usual, four guards got into the vehicle – I’d taught

them to accompany us wherever we went.

I was going to the base for the first time and felt very uncertain. They could say, "Guys, you've become pretty shameless!" or something like that.

We arrived at the Cuban command post and I asked a Cuban soldier: "Amigo, excuse me please, where can I find your logistics officer?"

He looked at me. "*Sovietico*?"

"*Sovietico*," I acknowledged.

"Wait a bit," he said and left.

For some time we stood around waiting. All of a sudden I saw a Cuban officer, a captain, judging by his pips, with a smile on his face. His smile was so warm that my spirits lifted and I told myself that everything would be fine.

"Problems?" he asked.

I told him we'd run short of flour and everybody wanted to eat bread.

He said, "Let's go." He got into our vehicle and we headed for the warehouse. Their warehouse was the same as the Angolan one, a pit and a roof covered with camouflage netting. When we entered he asked, "How much flour do you need?"

"What do you mean how much?"

"Well, how many bags?"

We'd brought a small bag for about 25 kilograms of flour, but there were a lot of 50-kilogram flour bags in front of us.

I said, "I don't know, as much as you can give us."

"Well, take them", he said, "That'll be enough for some time and then you can come again. No problem. We'll give you as much as you need."

"Roger." The Angolans promptly lifted the bags onto their shoulders and loaded them into our vehicle.

"What else do you need?" he asked. "There are various tins, crackers, butter, margarine, stewed meat in cans – see exactly what you need."

In brief, he showed us around all the warehouses. Sure, I wasn't pushy – we took only what he offered us.

When we were about to leave he told me in plain language: "Don't be shy – if you need something please come. For us you are our senior brothers. By the way, do you need uniforms, boots, camouflage?"

Well, we certainly needed uniform and boots. They wear out fast in field conditions.

As we were leaving, the Cuban officer said goodbye. "Please come again. Or even better, bring your men with you, we'll match the proper sizes right here, there'll be no problem."

We arrived back in high spirits. Vladimir Nikolayevich was sitting in the pavilion we'd made.

"Well, Igor, have you managed to get anything?" he asked.

"Indeed," I said, "we've taken just a bit of what we could."

He approached the vehicle and his eyes jumped out of his head. "Igor! How come?"

"Well, we've taken only what the Cubans offered us."

"But this is not right," he exclaimed.

"What do you mean not right? They offered everything themselves."

"No. I don't believe you."

Then Tolya came to my defence. "Commander, what's the problem? I saw it all." Only then did Vladimir Nikolayevich calm down. He knew Tolya wouldn't lie or tolerate poor conduct.

In this way I had ample opportunity to see that the Cubans really were our brothers. But then, I never abused their confidence or took advantage of their kindness.

The Cubans built a dugout to seat 50 people, brought a TV and video recorder, and every week they changed cassettes for new videos, taking advantage of regular and official helicopter trips. And the Cubans really enjoyed their video recorder. When we visited them and asked to come and watch the films, their General said, "Sure, please come over whenever you want."

Our Soviet mission only had an old Ukraine film projector, and we were watching Tajik blockbusters about the Revolution – with the Red Flag, lots of enemies, everybody fighting, but in the end the Soviet forces victorious, or something like that. Sixteen parts in one show, since the film reel broke endlessly.

That film projector was absolutely useless. Then it worked only because Valera Cheryomukhin – a wizard with his hands! – found, repaired and

finetuned it on his own initiative. Valera became our cinema operator and he started showing us films. The district deputy commander for political affairs promptly sent a request to Luanda: "Please send films for us to watch." And they charged us two dollars for those films! Still, thank heaven we at least had a projector of our own when we weren't over with the Cubans.

The Cubans were based quite close to us. We were 13 kilometres from Cuito Cuanavale and they were about 25, so we were just 12 kilometres apart. So, in the evening we got into the vehicle with sub-machine-guns and grenades and drove to the Cubans to watch videos. I smile at the memory now – just imagine, "longing can find no rest" – we drove that long way at night, sometimes in total darkness, for simple entertainment. We could have tripped a mine or driven into an ambush.

The Cuban General Ochoa invited us to dinner and said, "Guys, no problem. One day of the week" (was it Wednesday or Thursday?) "the hall will be reserved for Soviets only. Please come if you like, the hall will be at your disposal. All the cassettes will be available and we'll appoint a soldier to show any film you wish. Come and watch the films. Or if you want, come every day in a group of five, six or even seven. The second and third rows of seats will be reserved for you, so come."

For sure, we spread the news in our military district. Our senior district adviser said: "It's usually difficult and dangerous, please observe all security measures. Yes, you can go," and we went there with an adviser, either Col. Vladimir Altshuler or Col. Mityaev.

The Cubans fought very well. In 1975 they routed the Zaireans (and lo and behold, it was reported as a great victory for the Angolan army). Fidel Castro said, "Forward, lads" and they scattered the column of Zairean troops coming from the north and sprayed them with rockets from the BM-21 Katyusha multiple rocket launchers. They simply wiped them out with raw firepower, leaving no one alive. Yet it was said, "These Angolans are fine chaps."

Well, as I've said, if it hadn't been for Cuba, Angola would have ceased to exist very quickly. Angola would have simply been wiped off the face of the earth.

Goodbye, Angola!

The end of the war was in sight, but in fact military activities hadn't stopped anywhere even though the South Africans had solemnly announced the beginning of the withdrawal of their forces from Angola.

The South Africans, by the way, being remarkable gentlemen, had bombarded only the Angolan brigades. In other words, I think the bombardment of our camp wasn't part of their plans. Perhaps they didn't want to risk international complications or confrontation with the Soviet Union, or something like that. But this evidently applied only to our own camp, whereas with all the others it was war as usual. So, if the Soviet adviser goes to his brigade and walks into a bombardment there, nothing can be done – war is war!

The South Africans sent us an ultimatum before 11 March 1988 stating: "Soviets, leave Cuito Cuanavale, we don't want to touch you." These leaflets were in English. The Angolans brought the leaflets to us and asked us to translate them because they couldn't decipher the message. Those leaflets were packed inside hollow artillery shells, like propaganda! Their warning was precise, concrete and clearly written. "Soviets, we don't want to touch you. Go away. Leave, please. We want right now to cut up these Angolans." After the South African message we received orders from Luanda saying, "Look after your own security." But how could we look after our own security? The road to Menongue was cut off for three months, in fact that road, 180 km long, was controlled by UNITA. We were encircled.

We served at the very southern border of Angola, on the initial defence line, yet by the end of our mission we started receiving this message: "You will be the last to be replaced, after all the others."

This was bad news. Our mission of two years was coming to an end, and now we'd be the last to return! At first our command said we'd be replaced in September. I arrived in Angola on 1 August 1986. In principle I should have been replaced on 1 August 1988. Now they said September. But it got worse. The rumour was that it would happen in November. And then we heard there'd be no replacement before December.

Later on I just thought: What can a man do? This is God's will.

Quite unexpectedly on 22 August, Cuban helicopters arrived. They

brought Cuban actors, a song and dance group. To the fighting positions! Can you imagine Soviet actors coming here? Soviet actors performed only in Luanda and in the larger cities of Angola. Well, the Cuban helicopters brought well-shaped girls to gladden the hearts of the soldiers.

Usually we went to meet the Cuban helicopters because they brought us letters. They picked up our mail in Menongue, the main city of the 6th military district, brought them to Cuito Cuanavale, and we were there to meet them. But that time we didn't go, and nor did the infantrymen. We'd heard that some actors had arrived and we assumed the letters wouldn't be on the helicopters. I was sitting in my dugout and all of a sudden had an idea. I went out, approached Tolya Semenikhin and told him, "Let's go and see, maybe they brought our letters after all."

He said, "Well, let's go!" We got into the car, our guards joined us and off we went. As we drove on a bit we saw a truck moving in our direction with two white men in camouflage as passengers. I immediately got wind of something, climbed out of our truck and asked, "Stop – who are you?"

One of the men said, "I am the Pechora specialist coming to replace a specialist."

The other said, "I am an interpreter, I am coming to replace somebody, I don't remember the surname precisely, I think it's Zhdarkin."

"Well, well, please repeat the names of those whom you are going to replace," I asked him.

He was a bit frightened. "Zhdarkin, I think."

I gave a heart-stopping yell for the whole world to hear. "Aaaah!"

Our guards got the point at once, climbed out of the truck and hugged me.

I told the frightened youngster: "Old chap, you've come to replace *me*!"

So we turned back to the camp, I showed him the dugout where he'd live, and all around the camp. Then we went to our brigade command post and I stepped into the commander's dugout and said, "David, here is a new interpreter, he will replace me."

The commander asked, "And when are you planning to leave?"

"I don't know, probably with the next helicopter."

"Don't you want to leave right now?"

“But the helicopters must have left already.”

“No, not yet, they are still at the concert and are not yet going to leave. Wait a second.”

He ducked into the underground command centre and phoned the Cubans.

“They haven’t left yet, they’ll be staying for a long time. You have enough time for sure,” he said to me.

“Are you serious?” At first I couldn’t even believe it was possible to leave right away.

I embraced David when we parted – we’d worked well together – and said goodbye to the other officers and soldiers of the brigade, and rushed back to our camp.

David said that I had at least forty minutes, so I had a wash in the sauna, handed everything over to the new interpreter replacing me, got a confirmation note about turning in weapons from Col. Mityaev. He also prepared a certificate to confirm the period when I’d served in Cuito Cuanavale and about my participation in combat actions.

I came out of the dugout to say goodbye to our Angolan guards. They fell in line – all ten guards. I said, “Who is going to accompany me to the helicopter? Please select the most honourable.” I said this as a joke, but they started arguing – I did not expect this and was on the brink of tears. All ten of them wanted to come. Finally they chose four and I said goodbye to the others.

When we reached the helicopters the engines were already running. I rushed to the second helicopter and shouted, “That’s all, I’m leaving, my mission here is over!”

The Cubans answered, “We’ll take you on, no problem.”

I got onto the helicopter – and at that very moment, enemy artillery firing started! The South Africans were firing their G-6 long-range guns. These had a range of 47 kilometres but the enemy managed to bring them very close to the Angolan combat positions to fire against Cuban helicopters landing 30 kilometres from Cuito Cuanavale. So, I was sitting in the helicopter and thinking, God damn! Isn’t it enough for me? Is it possible that I’ll *never* leave? Meanwhile the shells fell closer and closer.

At that moment a Cuban technician I knew popped out of the cabin. "Geronimo, why are you here?" he asked.

I said, "My mission's over. *Para casa!* (Back home!)"

He went back into the cabin and returned with what was left of a bottle of Havana Club rum.

"Do you have anything else to drink for yourself?" I asked him.

"No, nothing, you enjoy it, finish it. You are so lucky. I have to stay here for six months more."

I arrived in Menongue. Next day we had briefing about political news. Col. Velichko announced: "Here is Lt. Igor Zhdarkin, he's completed his mission in Angola" (by then I had already been promoted to the rank of lieutenant) "and fulfilled his international duty. Let's give him a hand."

Col. Velichko told me, "Well, Igor, do as you like, your mission is over. If you like, you can rest here. You don't have to do anything at all. You can drink and enjoy yourself, no problem. If you wish, you can go to Luanda."

I answered, "I'd rather rest here." But next morning he approached me and said, "You know, Igor, the plane's arrived. If you want to, you can go to Luanda, I'll include you on the list of passengers."

I put two and two together. "Well, what would I stay here for?" So I left for Luanda. There I went to see Lt.-Col. Victor Alexandrovich Belyukin, our senior interpreter in Angola, the one who later got me my 'For Meritorious Combat' medal. I told him: "It's all over and I am here." He answered: "Well, no questions. Have a rest, catch up on sleep, drink vodka; you don't have to do anything any more. You're a veteran: you spent two years in the jungle. You are a man of real status here."

I told him: "I want to go home."

"It will be difficult," he answered, "but you know, visit the military personnel department, just try, maybe you'll succeed."

So, I went to the military personnel department, where a 'very important-looking' man was sitting. I could see at a glance that he was based in Luanda and only went to combat districts from time to time in order to get awards. I could spot the type immediately, but now it didn't matter to me any more. I explained I wanted to go home. He said, "On 27 August the military adviser is due to leave with his spouse, but there's

only one ticket and he doesn't want to go without his wife. Come see me tomorrow."

Next day – a miracle! The adviser refused to go on his own, the ticket was given to me and I was to fly home on 27 August, while our other guys left only on 10 September. Every day mattered.

I was crazy with joy: it couldn't be true, I didn't believe myself. We rushed to the shop in our Luanda military mission, where the salespeople were wives of our military specialists. And many specialists were my colleagues and friends. I told them: "Hurrah, ladies, my mission is over! Charge me everything the guys want to take for a party. We're going to celebrate!"

We had a great farewell party. Interpreters and specialists came, and everybody wished me a happy journey. That was the start of my trip back home!

Recollections of Guns, Tanks and Bombs



Vyacheslav Anatoliyevich Barabulya

Zhdarkin's friend Vyacheslav Anatoliyevich Barabulya served in Angola as translator from 1986 to 1988. The last six months of his tour of duty were spent in the city of Menongue and in Cuito Cuanavale just as the South African attack began. He had graduated in 1992 from the Military Institute for Foreign Languages in Moscow.

After resigning from the army he received another higher education qualification in economics. He now lives in Moscow and works as a manager of the state-owned railway company. He is the recipient of the USSR medal 'For Meritorious Combat' and the Cuban medal 'To the Heroic Defenders of Cuito Cuanavale'.

I SERVED THE FIRST 18 MONTHS of my time in Angola in the 1st military district in the city of Huige. I had spent two or three days in Luanda on arrival in 1986 and was the first of our group to leave on a Mi-8 helicopter for the far north, for the province of Huige on the frontier with Zaire (now Democratic Republic of the Congo). The international border followed the Congo River.

Naturally it was very difficult for me at first. My experience as a translator, for which we'd received training at the institute, was invaluable.

All the same, in Angola I had to write down practically every word – ‘road’, ‘dust’, ‘lamp’, ‘teapot’. Our studies had just emphasised ‘division’, ‘regiment’ and other military terms! So I had to start from scratch.

As for my work in the 1st military district, I must make it clear that, for an adviser to be on top of everything, he had to attend the daily meetings within the district command and an interpreter had to accompany him.

Conditions in the district were rather difficult. The FNLA and at times UNITA didn’t give us any rest. A commonly held view at the time was that the FNLA and their leader Holden Roberto had already left the scene. But the FNLA still operated, now as an irregular army. What we had to face were just guerrilla detachments without a common leadership. Still, their presence meant the MPLA couldn’t assert their control over all urban centres in the province.

The weapons used by the FNLA were from all over the world, starting with our Kalashnikov sub-machine-guns, manufactured in different countries, right down to West German G-3 assault rifles and even ordinary hunting carbines and rifles with funnel-shaped openings – they were old Portuguese muskets! Among the weapons captured we also came across a type of sawn-off gun without a butt-stock. I saw them all.

Military operations were conducted in defined zones within the 1st military district. I refer to what occurred between 1 October and 1 December. An operational staff was formed for the military activities. Several individuals from our district were required to take part. I participated as a translator. But we didn’t take a direct part in combat action.

We flew by Mi-8 helicopter and also in Anglo-French Alouette III two-seater helicopters, all belonging to FAPLA. The Mi-8 was equipped with unguided missiles. It was like being armed with toy pistols. To do anything at all, you had to hit the target spot on with those missiles! We called in Mi-24 attack helicopters (“Crocodiles”) from Luanda 200 km away in support of our operations. They flew in, did their job and flew off again. None of them were stationed in our district.

Planes couldn’t land where we were in Huige because the landing strip could only accommodate helicopters. As there were no large FNLA bases

in Huige Province, it wasn't necessary to bomb them from the air. Anyway, an FNLA base would, for example, remain for two or three days in one place and then be moved. It was simpler to hit bases from helicopters or else with the BM-21 'Grad' multiple launch rocket system.

In our district there were also four T-34-85 tanks, four PT-76 amphibious tanks and two BRT-60PB armoured troop carriers, otherwise no other heavy military equipment. We found that the PT-76 tank wasn't able to cross marshy flood-lands. But even in those few places where the approach to the river was dry, a tank still couldn't get through the water because the sidelong hollow tanks needed for buoyancy would have disappeared – the Angolans were in the habit of removing them to roof their huts.

Within a year of service I went on leave for 45 days, and when I returned I served yet another half-year in the same province. Again and again I asked to be transferred to a more active district. Finally, in December 1987, they sent me south to Cuito Cuanavale.

I flew to Menongue and then went on to Cuito. I'd only just got there when they woke me at around one o'clock in the morning and summoned me to the command post. The South African army had started their attack.

Our mission was seven kilometres from Cuito Cuanavale. UNITA and the South African Air Force had shelled it when it was in Cuito, so it had been moved away into a forest to screen us a bit from artillery shelling. When I arrived I heard that things had been quiet there. The Cubans were twice as far from Cuito Cuanavale as we were.

So I got to the mission and the shelling began, from long-range South African G-5 howitzers and self-propelled G-6 guns. They struck from 47 kilometres away, a distance our own artillery couldn't match.

The command centre of the Pechora anti-aircraft system was housed in our mission, but the sub-units of the system were dispersed along the front. The South African G-5 and G-6 artillery seemed mostly to be shelling the Cubans! They fired over our heads and the rockets flew past us. We sat and looked as the 'beetles' flew overhead to the Cuban side.

On the whole, the attack, bombardments and the advances of the armies began in 1987. The Angolan 16th, 21st, 25th, 47th and 59th brigades were

destroyed by the South Africans. What I remember from this whole time was the excellent relations within our units, the bonding and camaraderie. I still miss this, long after resigning from the army. There were many times when we all supported each other – for us to have acted otherwise would have been simply impossible or else we couldn't have survived.

We drank 'technical' alcohol sent to maintain the Pechora system. We filtered it any way we could and drank almost 200 litres within a few months. The question arose: how to write off the liquor in our reports? We did what the commander said, and wrote "direct shell hit".

When there is a bombardment, one lives through it quite easily. The shock comes somewhat later. When you lie down to sleep at night and you're just dropping off and you start to imagine the trajectory of the shells, the flying of the shrapnel, that's when terror sets in and it becomes very difficult to fall asleep. The hardest time is when everything's over, not before or during action. It was easy to visit the frontline, easy to endure the bombardment. But when you return to your billet and begin to rest, this shock switches on. So 200 grams of water, half-diluted with 96-per-cent-proof spirit, was essential.

Every morning we'd go to our workplace at district headquarters. That was right next to Cuito. We'd drive there in UAZ-469 jeeps and sometimes BRDM-2 armoured scout cars. We also had BTR-60PB armoured troop carriers and BMP-1 infantry combat vehicles, but they stood in fortified structures (*caponiers*) all the time, ready for rapid evacuation. But the BRDM-2 was our workhorse and we used it as a car for travelling.

Going along in it we sometimes came under bombardment. I remember one time when shells began to explode around us and shrapnel was hitting the armour of the car. It wasn't pierced but severely hit, with a loud bang. A South African G-6 had located us by radio. We had a set in the car and they'd taken our bearings. It was raining that day. After the attack, once things went quiet, we all climbed out. I looked around and the BRDM-2 was all wet, yet the shrapnel had dried out some places even in the rain as the armour heated up. I'll remember those dry spots for the rest of my life. This was in January or February 1988.

The seizure of a South African Olifant tank was a major event. Four

or five were blown up. Any Olifant that was blown up would have been dragged away by armoured South African Samil-100 towing trucks.

But after one of the battles, the South Africans simply lacked the capability to evacuate the destroyed Olifant. One of the guide wheels of the captured tank had already been torn out when we pulled it off the road. When this Olifant was hauled away, I was impressed by the spaciousness of the working area inside. That part was painted yellowish white. Compared to our own tanks, it was as spotlessly clean as a surgical operating theatre. And there was so much room for the crew to move around. Yet the Olifant was quite vulnerable because it was so big and high. Our tanks really did surpass it, but I only heard about one or two direct battles between them.

Well, each side spoke about the results of the battle as they saw things. There were few decisive results for us. Neither Cubans nor Angolans prevailed, except for that one tank incident. And then they beat the South African tanks because of a massive Cuban attack with all sorts of forces.

Still, the Olifants scared the daylights out of FAPLA. These guys would run away the minute they saw this huge monster. The South Africans might have made the same impression with T-54, T-55, T-62 or T-72 tanks because any South African tank daunted the Angolans. They'd still have run for their lives.

The raids of the South African Mirage fighter bombers were also remarkable. Unlike the Impala attack aircraft which flew quite high, these planes would come in at low altitude, not more than 50 metres. We'd hear a sudden savage roar and rush for cover. These Mirages dropped 500-kilogram bombs with delayed-action mechanisms.

Once three or four 500-kilogram bombs hit a swamp and stood on end. Just then the Angolans drove up in a BTR-60PB armoured troop carrier. They got out, and patted the bombs a bit, then drove off. They were some 300 to 400 metres away when one of the bombs blew up! The Angolans were just lucky it hadn't happened when they'd thumped the bomb. The hole made by a bomb like that is huge. You could take two infantry combat vehicles and drop them in, and they'd disappear. I've got a photograph of a hole like that.

Memories of War in Angola



Anatoliy Eduardovich Alekseevsky

Anatoliy Eduardovich Alekseevsky took part in an accelerated course of Portuguese at the Military Institute for Foreign Languages in 1985–6. Soon to become a junior lieutenant, he was sent to Angola from 1986 to 1988 on what was then called a service mission. He graduated in 1992 from the Military Institute for Foreign Languages

in Moscow. He has since resigned from the armed forces and is settled in Belarus.

I ARRIVED IN LUANDA in August 1986 and was immediately sent with others to the 3rd military district in the south-east of the country. Geographically this includes the towns of Cazombo, Luena, Lukusi and Saurimo and the Lungebunge River. Actually, Saurimo is in the 10th military district but our mobile command post was located there.

To be honest, I can't remember properly which day was my first in the war. I served in the 3rd infantry brigade for a year and three months, from July 1986 until 1987. The 3rd brigade was deemed an infantry brigade even though we had T-55 tanks and BTR-60PB APCs. Then I went on leave and on my return I went to the 143rd brigade, also in the 3rd district. This was an air defence brigade, which provided anti-aircraft cover for

Luena and the brigades operating in the area.

At first, of course, because of my age I didn't realise what was happening there as I do now. I just saw with the eyes of a 19-year-old. Today, when you begin to recount everything, you judge yourself, your actions and the actions of others very differently. In the end you understand that war is really a cruel thing. What you saw there, you'd never see and learn about in civilian life.

Of course it was difficult. Almost all the interpreters overcame the language barrier within the first two months. No real difficulties there. But it wasn't as easy when it came to the way of life of the servicemen and the combat actions themselves. After ordinary civilian life it's quite hard to move into a state of war. We were trained as interpreters. We weren't prepared for taking up a rifle at the right moment and defending ourselves, having to shoot, to kill someone. We weren't trained for that. We'd had a minimal course of general military training, but we weren't trained for *that*. Of course we understood that we might have to kill a person, but we didn't realise it would really happen.

We had to learn a lot all at once. Being in the brigade alongside our senior advisers and the interpreters who were already there, I learnt from their experiences. Straight away I tried to study everything I needed to know for survival in those conditions. This is a personal thing. As for the operations we took part in, we understood that a real war was being waged between the Angolan government and the so-called opposition, or simply "the bandits".

Everyone was given his own tasks. Somehow there was a kind of belief that we were busy doing something constructive. At the time I never heard a military adviser ask questions like: "Why are we here? Why are we fighting this war?" I imagine they felt that if you're ordered to do something, you just do it.

When I was in the 3rd district I had to work not only in the brigades but with the advisers of the whole district because interpreters were scarce. Sometimes I'd have to work in several brigades, go to the various district meetings, work directly with the district commander and the chief military adviser; and sometimes I'd work in hospitals and depots.

So I met our people everywhere. I gradually saw how vital an interpreter is in Angola, especially in terms of supplies. You would effectively become the deputy for logistics. And during military action the capability of the military adviser depended directly on the quality of the translation and hence on how well you did your job.

Our duties included not only first-hand interpretation of commands, but we had to establish communications too. We'd have to open out the antenna of our Racal radio transmitters or the Soviet R-143 transmitters that we had as well. We'd encrypt and decrypt messages. Sometimes we would tune in to a wavelength and try to find the conversations of UNITA.

There were all kinds of incidents. A couple of times we even had to decipher UNITA's radiograms, quite successfully I must say, as FAPLA had samples of their decipherment codes. Their intelligence also worked, because UNITA sometimes cracked our messages too. We saw this once when we were in the Kasamba region, I think, sometime in August 1987. As our 3rd brigade moved from one position to another I sent a radiogram in code to the district about where we were. The district command also sent coded messages with their coordinates, so it was pretty much dubbing. Our military advisers, knowing that there were leakages of information, always gave our coordinates a bit skew, let's say five to seven kilometres to the south, east or west. We had an agreement with FAPLA, who also gave imprecise data when they dubbed our messages.

So we were moving – and a brigade is very vulnerable when it's moving; there is only a side cordon, no dugouts or anything. And there was a raid by the SAAF, bombing the precise coordinates we'd sent out. This was literally four hours after we sent the radiogram.

It might have been Mirage-2000s or Cheetahs that did the bombing. We couldn't tell the type of the planes for sure, not having shot any down. Of course we were five or six kilometres away from their empty target area, thanks to the false coordinates. The planes flew quite low. What with that and their high speed, they didn't notice us.

Well, we knew then that there was a leak of information. When they flew away, we sent a query to the district: "Who received this information and using what channels? How was this information circulated?"

You could say that all the operations were interesting because of all the nuances – for instance, the fact that the fighting spirit among the Angolans was, to be honest, virtually nonexistent. Mainly these were guys recruited from the back of a plough, so to speak. There weren't really any men who genuinely wanted to serve in the army.

Even so, there wasn't any desertion as such. But a man who tripped an anti-personnel mine or suffered some other fairly light injury was glad that he'd soon be sent back to the district and ultimately wouldn't have to fight. That's the way things were. People wanted to leave the brigade but according to the book. To run away was virtually impossible, and they knew that. You couldn't go into the forest because you'd probably meet UNITA forces and then be forced to fight on their side. It was one or the other.

Around May 1987, we at Lukusi were instructed to move to Kasamba and Kaniamba. The distance we had to cover was 100 to 120 kilometres on foot in the savannah. This proved difficult. In some places we used the roads, in others we went through the savannah. When we knew there weren't mines, we used the roads. Where we weren't sure or couldn't check the roads, we'd go through the savannah.

Our column consisted of T-55 tanks, armoured personnel carriers and mainly Ural and Unimog trucks. We also had IFA and KrAZ trucks. Then we had the MTLBs4 – this is a Strela-10 on a multi-purpose tracked vehicle – and the BTR-60PB armoured personnel carrier. But the BTRs were only there for us advisers, except that the brigade commander had one to himself. BRDM-2 armoured scout cars weren't part of our brigade, so the soldiers went on foot.

All in all, the brigade had heavy weaponry because we also had 82-mm mortars and four 120-mm mortars. For cover from enemy aircraft we had Shilkas (ZSU-23-4) and Zeushkas (ZU-23-2). At one point there was also one BM-21 rocket launcher with us. But in the end we had to say goodbye to it – more about that later.

The brigade stopped in defensive positions 100 to 120 kilometres south of the Ungebungue River. It appears that the district command had planned that we would draw some of the UNITA battalions towards us.

The same role was played by the 39th brigade to the east of us, at about the same distance from Lukusi. But we were much more powerfully armed, which is why in the end we managed to escape from the encirclement on our own.

UNITA didn't try to attack us openly, but mainly used ambushes and missile artillery attacks. They had Valkiris – a copy of the BM-21 rocket launcher. They often fired on us using the Valkiris. From certain channels we heard that we were fired upon by South Africans from UNITA positions.

Once UNITA fired on us using a BM-21. At that stage we were sitting in the encirclement and a FAPLA column, which had a BM-21, came to help us. Evidently UNITA, having captured the column and hence the BM-21 and part of the ammunition, fired one salvo at us. When the ammunition ran out they must have abandoned it.

Our brigade spent some time in the defence of Kasamba, where we were unable to get more foodstuffs, ammunition or fuel. Fuel and food were coming to an end, cases of jaundice began to break out. There were three attempts to send us Mi-8 helicopters. Twice they had to turn back because they were fired upon and the third time one was shot down. The pilots were Angolans, not our guys or Cubans. That's why they didn't reach us.

In the end we got to the point where we had to break out by ourselves. The decision was made by the highest Angolan command. We gathered the last of the fuel, foodstuffs and ammunition and loaded it into the vehicle we'd decided to take with us. We left the remaining equipment but ensured it couldn't be used. We took sledgehammers, pickaxes and shovels and used them to break up the motors, engine crankcases and carburettors. After that, the trucks were beyond repair. Of course we also cut up the tyres.

To escape encirclement we had to disengage and there was a limit to the amount of hardware we could take with us. Look, taking the tanks was a must under any circumstances. If the fuel had run out we'd have lost them, so with our limited supplies we decided this: first the tanks go, then we move the Strela-10s for defence against the Mirages. The BTRs also left. This was all the hardware we could fill up with fuel. So in the end

we left about five Urals, a couple of IFA trucks and a couple of Unimogs behind. We were moving without them, having loaded the ammunition, provisions and everything necessary on the other vehicles. The brigade had to walk.

As I've mentioned, we couldn't move the BM-21 rocket launcher out. So we activated the missile heads and blew it up. We also had quite a large stock of ammunition but we had to destroy it. Mainly these were rounds for tanks, BTRs, BM-21s and cartridges. We exploded all of this by activating the BM-21 missiles. When those exploded, they detonated all the rest.

Then we retreated 100 kilometres to Lukusi, back to our mobile command post. There the brigade received reinforcements and supplies and freshened itself up. Getting to Lukusi took about a week. We didn't move particularly quickly, having to check whether there were any minefields and so on.

In fact we suffered most on the way back. There were attacks by the UNITA battalion, which stalked our retreat. They realised there wasn't much equipment or anything else left, and knew that the brigade was escaping from encirclement. They attacked not only at night but even in daytime. And there were a couple of rather heavy engagements, to the point where our flanking guard was destroyed. UNITA troops almost reached the line where the flanking guards had been and we ourselves were forced to fire back, using our assault rifles. Naturally there weren't any trenches as the brigade was on the move.

The bodies from the UNITA side remained on the ground because our own tanks entered the battle. At first the tanks didn't open fire because they were subject to the brigade commander and he didn't give the order. But then our military adviser overruled this: it was time to use the tanks. So we opened direct tank fire and also used the machine guns on the tanks.

The distance was just a few hundred metres – around 500, perhaps even 400 metres in places. From this range UNITA men fired on us using small arms. We didn't use snipers because we didn't have any SVD sniper rifles and anyway we didn't have any trained snipers in our brigade. As for UNITA, judging by our losses I'd say that they possibly didn't use snipers

either. For the most part in our brigade we had casualties from mortar fire, G-3 assault rifles and our own Kalashnikovs that UNITA used.

In the end we managed to fend off these attacks and make it back to Lukusi. At that time, in August 1987, we received instructions from district command that we must go to the south-east to pull out the encircled 39th brigade. Their task there had been to distract UNITA. As I understood it, the leadership didn't plan to carry out offensive operations in this region.

We ourselves were simply a decoy too. We were sent something like 100 kilometres away from the command post, and together both FAPLA brigades enticed about ten or twelve UNITA battalions to target them. It worked out at four to six battalions of the enemy against each of our brigades. A UNITA battalion consisted of 400 to 600 troops. Our brigade was quite large – around 1200 to 1500 men. But by the time we broke through the encirclement there were only about 800 left.

It was at this time that the FAPLA offensive was being prepared in the region of Cuito Cuanavale. We carried out our decoy manoeuvre in advance, so UNITA knew that an offensive could be developing here. We simply drove a wedge in the region they controlled and thus stopped ten to twelve enemy battalions being moved to Cuito.

On our way to free the 39th brigade, there had been about four clashes with UNITA on the road. They quickly organised themselves and drew in a considerable amount of equipment and men, so a couple of these clashes were very fierce.

They brought along the BM-21 and Valkiri missile artillery. When there were bombardments using missiles we judged that these were either the South Africans themselves or UNITA using South African hardware. First they would range in, using mortars. They would only fire three or four shells, mainly 82 mm. And then the Valkiri rocket launcher would begin to fire. They sent out the whole salvo of 24 rockets; we counted the explosions. Sometimes they'd fire three to four ripples or salvoes.

We also had frequent visits by SAAF Mirages. But in this region we now had the opportunity of calling on the Cubans and their MiG-21bis (there weren't any MiG-23s in our district). The Cuban MiG-21bis did the job; the South African Mirages flew away from them all the time.

We called on these Cuban fighter planes a couple of times, and from the things they did in the air it was clear that these were the Great Cubans – amazing. Once when the Cubans encountered the Mirages, they almost entered aerial combat, but the South Africans simply left, ran away. They could see from the MIGs' flight pattern that these weren't Angolans. The Cubans didn't insist on aerial combat and returned to base. But the fact that they could cover us from the air, besides our ability to shoot at the Mirages from the ground, really helped us.

By the way, we made a couple of successful shots from the Strela-10. We shot down one South African plane and damaged another one, but it managed to fly away. You could see it had been hit because of the trail of black smoke it left behind.

When we reached the 39th brigade they were in quite a sorry state, completely encircled. We broke through this circle, came up to them and gave them fuel. Then we positioned ourselves in defensive formations where they were. We reorganised ourselves and formed a united command, with our brigade commander in charge of both brigades. We assumed a formation and started to fight our way out.

As we were leaving, the enemy tried to attack us again, but it didn't work because we'd regrouped and became a powerful force, and returned fire without worrying about ammunition. UNITA found themselves being fired on by 100-mm tank guns and KPV 14.5-mm machine guns on the BTRs. On the whole, everything worked. We didn't count the amount of cartridges and shells we used because we knew we were retreating and were sure that there would be enough for the entire return trip.

We successfully forced back about three UNITA battalions in front of us. All told, there were about four battalions on our side and about five of the enemy. Later, near Lukusi, with about 40 kilometres left to go, UNITA undertook one last attack, but I think there were only two UNITA battalions attacking us then. It wasn't a meaningful engagement, just a skirmish.

Here we used ammunition sparingly and tried not to fire unnecessarily, especially since we would have to carry out area fire. And anyway, to be honest, we didn't fire much in reply because it didn't seem necessary – these

were not organised UNITA units firing on us but small groups that had been given our coordinates and told to fire on us several times and disengage. We didn't aim to oppose them or come into direct contact with them.

The only thing we did do was send out surveillance patrols frequently. These reconnaissance groups consisted of between ten and fifteen men armed with assault rifles, a machine gun, sometimes mortars and always grenade launchers. There was always one grenade launcher operator in the group, but not always mortar operators. We used the light, portable version of the 60-mm mortars, captured earlier from UNITA. We had ammunition for it, so we used it.

We and the 39th brigade arrived at Lukusi and then, when our replacements came, I went on my first home leave. We flew home via Sofia in Bulgaria and then it was straight on to Moscow.

On my return from leave I was sent to the 143rd air defence brigade, staffed partly by infantry. I worked there for around four months. The brigade's task was to protect the air space. It was located in Luena during my time; after I left, the brigade was moved to the south of the district.

At Luena we had anti-aircraft guns (Shilkas and Strela-10s) – four of them, which covered the entire brigade position – and a KMTLB command tracking station on the base of a GAZ-66 truck with a cabin and a large-scale radar. Although the other tracking stations had their own radar, the KMTLB was the central, most powerful one controlling the whole network.

After my time in the 143rd brigade I was sent to the centre for the training of infantry sergeants in Huambo. I served there for four months. Then I returned to the 3rd district and stayed there till the end of my tour of duty in Angola, now in the role of interpreter for the command of the 3rd military district. There were three interpreters with the district command – the senior interpreter, a captain and two lieutenants, I being one of them (having reached the rank of lieutenant by then). We were working at district level, not brigade level, thanks to our greater experience.

While there I managed to make one flight on an AN-26 to Kasombo, one of the easternmost towns in Angola. Stationed there was the 45th brigade, as I recall. We organised its defences, and improved the anti-

aircraft defence systems and its military dispositions in general.

Once a funny thing happened on the Ungebungwe River. Knowing there were crocodiles in the river we went to shoot one. The Angolans say you have to hit it in the side, the belly or eyes, something like that. But supposedly you can't shoot it with an AK-47. I was hoping that with our sub-machine-gun I might be able to pierce its armour. We went to the river. It wasn't very wide there, only about 15 to 20 metres. On the other side in the shade of the trees I saw something that looked like a crocodile. So I sent a burst of fire towards it. It fell into the water and floated belly up. I was even quite proud that I'd managed to hit and kill it. Its body was drifting downstream. Naturally, I didn't go to the river alone but with some Angolans. I sent them in to retrieve the crocodile's body. They were a bit scared, but they could see it had turned belly up, so they weren't particularly scared. They brought it to me and it turned out that it wasn't a crocodile but a monitor lizard.

I was thinking – what should I do with it? Throw it away? I don't need a monitor lizard. I asked the Angolans: "What can you do with it?"

"You can eat it," they answered.

"Are you going to eat it?"

"Nah," they replied.

"Well, take it to the brigade commander then. I'm sure he'll like a present like that." The next day I asked the brigade commander if he enjoyed his tasty snack.

"What was tasty?" he enquired. "What do you mean?"

"The meat of course!" I said. "I sent you a monitor lizard yesterday."

It turned out they didn't take it to him but ate it themselves. How they prepared it I don't know. But later the commander told me: "Next time you shoot anything that moves, bring it straight to me!" He showed me how to eat grasshoppers and caterpillars the size of your hand. All of this is fried in oil in a pan. It's pure protein. I declined to eat it.

Another incident. The air defence adviser and I were supposed to fly from Kazumbo to Luena but we got stuck in Kazumbo for quite a while. The purpose of the trip was to hand in our summaries of Marxist-Leninist philosophy as part of our educational programme. Our scripts weren't

ready, so we couldn't report to our district commander in Luena. We found a thousand reasons for not leaving Kazumbo as scheduled. But it wasn't just the scripts. There was another reason that was trivial and yet decisive: we had two 40-litre canisters of home-made beer and it had to be distilled into hooch. We had a distilling device (we Russian folk have our ways and means) and you just needed to wait for the necessary amount of time and the brew would be ready.

As it turned out, the episode wasn't funny at all. Literally an hour after the plane departed without us, we heard by radio that it had been shot down. You could say that the desire to distil home brew and the reluctance to give in our homework saved our lives. The crew of the plane were Angolan, and a friend of ours was on board, a Cuban adviser who'd flown to Kazumbo with us. Everyone died.

We sent out a reconnaissance group from Kazumbo. They found the wreckage and the crash site and brought back an arm with the epaulette of the Cuban adviser. Afterwards a question about us came from the district command: "Were there any Soviets on board?" We radioed back: "There were. They were flying to give in their summaries." This really meant: "We could have been on that plane because of you ... and then we would have been wiped off the earth."

When we finally arrived in Luena, half the mission turned up to meet us. The flood of emotion from our women touched me especially: "Tolik, you're alive!" I almost started crying. We survived because of such a stupid thing.

The home-brewed hooch was enjoyed in Kazumbo for about two weeks, and when we brought the rest back to the district it lasted there for about another month. We never had any proper alcohol in Angola, especially since vodka brought from Russia was a rarity. So our brew was considered quite a chic present. This *pervach*, the strongest high-quality hooch, was about 70 per cent proof as usual. We made it using condensed milk. Others made it with rice, but we had lots of concentrated milk from FAPLA. The milk was in three-litre cans, Portuguese and French-made, very weak and watery compared to the Russian product.

After returning from Angola I graduated from the Military Institute of Foreign Languages in 1992 and then quit the armed forces.

Life on the Savannah



Vladimir Anatoliyevich Korolkov

From 1986 to 1988 Vladimir Anatoliyevich Korolkov served in the south of Angola. After the completion of a one-year course in basic translation, he and his fellow military cadets on the Portuguese course were sent (with the rank of junior lieutenant) to Angola in September 1986. Later on, after graduating from the Military Institute of Foreign Languages in 1992, he resigned and became a successful art dealer.

I HARDLY REMEMBER what happened in Luanda during our first days over there, because we celebrated our arrival with such gusto. And all of us waited to hear where our assignment would take us.

I was going to the 2nd Angolan brigade in the extreme south. My mates gazed at me in pity and squeezed my hands and said, “We’ll visit you sometime” – but I only understood why they pitied me when I reached the 2nd brigade. I served there for two years.

We flew in an An-12 military transport plane to Lubango, the district headquarters in the province of Cunene. It was a lovely, simply breathtaking city built by the Portuguese. Next, they sent me from Lubango to join the 2nd motorised infantry brigade – all of 300 kilometres in a jeep! My first

impression was rather depressing, because it was savannah, occasionally expanding into small tropical groves, with only a few scattered shrubs, where the brigade was buried in dugouts over a territory of 15 kilometres.

The brigade consisted of two battalions of T-55 tanks, 44 of them altogether, and a platoon of four BM-21 rocket launchers and a BMP-1 infantry combat vehicle, a BRDM-2 armoured reconnaissance vehicle, a BTR-60PB armoured personnel carrier and the Zu-23-2 (Zeushka) 23-mm rapid-fire anti-aircraft cannon. There were also Strela-10 anti-aircraft rocket systems (eight pieces and two cannons). The anti-tank D-30 122-mm calibre guns were the brigade's basic weaponry. We constantly estimated range of fire, checking how close we could let the armoured units of the enemy approach us, and how to cover our flanks. We had no other guns. About 3000 Angolan soldiers also served in the brigade.

The Namibian border was 100 to 140 kilometres south from us – we couldn't be more exact because the border as such didn't exist, and it wasn't visible. Around the border area a depression began, as well as rather dense vegetation with occasional marshland. We once travelled to a place (I don't even remember its name) and after a while, according to our calculations, we were already in Namibia, yet the map showed we were still 20 kilometres north of the border. We asked the local blacks but they couldn't understand Portuguese, English or Kwanyama (an Ovambo dialect). They were dressed quite differently from what we were used to seeing; these were shepherds in ragged clothes with torn, broad-rimmed hats from the time of the conquistadors. We communicated with them by gestures.

During my first six months with the brigade I tried to adapt to the ordinary local Portuguese language, because the literary Portuguese we'd studied at the institute didn't correspond at all to everyday speech in the south. I began to ask the locals for their names of various things.

I tried to find out what they called the animals and flowers but without success, because they called any flower simply "a flower" and that was its proper name. And what about animals? Animals were *bishu* – any animal, from a worm to a lion. One of the locals ran up to me once and said, "Just near here a cow was eaten by a *bishu*."

"But what sort of animal does that?" I enquired. It appeared that a lion came at night into a neighbouring village half a kilometre from us, where there were several huts and cattle. The lion had somehow appeared at night in the thick of our brigade and gobbled up a cow.

A platoon of 12 Angolans guarded us. They didn't only guard our mission but also prepared meals and took care of housework. A cook prepared pancakes and potatoes. He naturally used firewood. Fortunately there was enough available. The trees, I forget their name, were of very soft timber which made a good fire. We used diesel engines for electricity but not for cooking. We were well provided for, with preserved meats and liquor from the brigade, and having our own cooks and our own produce. We traded preserved meats and condensed milk at *fazendas* for vegetables and fruit. As regards meat, there was direct barter. We exchanged 90-kilogram bags of sugar for 90 kilograms of meat; they cut off half carcasses of cows for us, put them on the scales and weighed them one by one.

At any one time there'd be between eight and twelve of us Soviet military advisers and specialists. But I was the only interpreter. During the second year, when the interpreter Dima Gerasimov accidentally turned up in our brigade, I used the pretext that one interpreter wasn't enough – we needed one in the brigade and one in the anti-aircraft defences – and I kept him in our brigade for six months.

It was fun and games in the 2nd brigade: the men were cheerful and just as well, because the climate was more than we'd bargained for, particularly in winter. The forests weren't anything like the green woods we knew, and the temperature during the day was over 50 degrees Celsius in the shade and at night minus one! You'd go to wash yourself in the morning and the water froze on your sideburns. Neither winter clothes nor mattresses helped. At night you shivered from the cold and thrashed around; your body couldn't adapt to such a drop in temperature.

In fact the local Angolans died like flies from the cold – their blood vessels and heart couldn't take it. Our own drops in temperature in Moscow are just minor compared with the Cahama area we were in.

But on the whole our military advisers weren't particularly keen to leave the area of the 2nd brigade and preferred to stay in the two-bed

dugouts we had there (only senior advisers were allotted a single dugout of their own). We had a summerhouse erected as an assembly hall. We planned military manoeuvres there, and met there every morning. I read out political news that I'd heard the night before on the transistor radio in English and Portuguese about Angola and what was being said about it all over the world.

We went hunting, of course. We used our AKMs and our pistols. With my German Walther 9-mm pistol, I killed 41 snakes during a period of two years – a record. Snakes are not killed just for nothing but from an instinct for self-preservation. You'd be taking a stroll, it's up in a tree and can fall on your head. That makes you alert.

Remember, everything that crawls, lives and grows there is harmful for man. Your hand is scratched by some thorn and the wound doesn't heal for a week because every plant contains vegetable poisons. You can't eat things without asking first if it's safe – even if the local Angolans eat something unfamiliar, it's better for you, an outsider, not to eat it because you don't know how your organism will react to something unknown. There's also malaria – a very dangerous disease. God help you if you don't cure it fully, the consequences are horrible: complete paralysis or death. And it's conveyed in different ways. If you have no immunity, you can contract it 15 times.

Our area was at the entrance to the port of Namibe (formerly Moçâmedes). You have to travel through the Namib Desert and then from Lubango to Namibe – this was, according to legend, the territory bewitched by the local shamans in long-forgotten times to stop whites from penetrating the land. That's what I heard from the local natives who were serving as soldiers in our brigade. No one knows exactly which century this was. And it was done not against white Russians but against Portuguese colonists.

More than once, when our military columns ignored these warnings and tried to penetrate this place, they were unsuccessful. The engines of the cars and trucks (including diesel engines) simply stopped and died. When our men tried to go on by foot, someone would break a leg and all of them had to turn back. This curse really existed.

I must mention the hairstyles of women in the tribe from Mamuil. Those people were regarded as among the most beautiful in southern Africa. The Portuguese colonisers actively exploited this. So the elders decreed that the women and girls of the tribe should grease their hair with cow dung and corn oil. The smell was appalling! And right away, the number of misdemeanours on the part of the Portuguese declined sharply, with a corresponding drop in mulattos being born.

The Cubans got to Cahama sometime in 1987, moving from the 13th parallel southwards. There were many of them, though their exact number wasn't known. They were rotated all the time. Some Cubans would arrive, but already within a week others would come. While 30 per cent of the original Cubans would remain, the rest consisted of new arrivals. It wasn't clear where they went afterwards, probably to another Angolan district.

I remember the Cuban women's ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft defence battalion, and all the girls, in particular the little mulattos with their military decorations. In the entire Cuban contingent I didn't see a single white; they were all blacks and mulattos.

A good number of Cuban troops were brought in, and not only troops but also construction brigades to build an airfield in Cahama. This was done to launch air strikes with MiG-23ML fighter bombers at targets in Namibia. At first they prepared an area three kilometres across, levelled it and covered it with concrete. The construction equipment, which worked day and night, had all been brought over from Cuba: small-size road graders and bulldozers like the KATO or Caterpillar. This airfield was meant to support the Cuban plan to cross the Namibian border by means of knife-like flanking strikes, and move on to Windhoek and further south towards South Africa.

The MiG-23s could have operated over half the territory of Namibia in order to give air cover to the Cuban forces. To launch an attack from Cahama, the Cubans assembled between 800 and 1000 T-54 and T-55 tanks (the numbers depended on who was speaking). There was also a relatively small number of T-62 tanks. If Fidel Castro, in later addresses in Cuba, spoke about 600 tanks, it meant there were *at least* 600 tanks – and he *did* mention 1000 Cuban tanks in the south of Angola. There also had

to be support equipment for them: petrol tankers, repair shops, caterpillar tractors for evacuating equipment, lorries for transporting shells for tanks, and machine-gun cartridges as well as foodstuffs. Other Cuban armaments included BRDM-2 armoured reconnaissance vehicles, BTR-60PB armoured personnel carriers and BMP-1 infantry combat vehicles.

Once we woke up at night and the ground was shaking. It was the Cuban tanks on the move, an enormous number of them. And when the South Africans received intelligence reports that such a large number of Cuban tanks were concentrated on the Namibian border ... well, I assume the South African anti-tank weaponry couldn't have withstood such a Cuban armada. The South Africans could have hit some of the Cuban tanks with their anti-tank guided missiles, grenade launchers, or tank or gun shells. But what about all the others?

Of course, we didn't have the right to ask anyone for information. The Cubans had mentioned the number of tanks during drinking bouts. Our task was to interact with the Cubans. They behaved in a very friendly way. Every Cuban above the rank of captain had studied in the USSR. Fraternal relations were the rule: they brought us rum and cigars, we watched videos together (everything from *filmes noires* and serious films to horror movies), and they helped us set up tennis courts and volleyball areas.

Then, later in 1988, groups from the Angolan ministry of defence, Cubans from our joint groups and an assortment of diplomats flew south to begin negotiations in Windhoek. The whole Cuban operation, which had been headed by Gen. Polo Cinta Frias, ended with the forced withdrawal of the South African Defence Force from Angola.

A word about Brig.-Gen. Ochoa. He was a prominent and popular personality not only in Cuba but in Ethiopia and Angola. I had the pleasure of meeting him three times in Cahama. This was in 1988, just at the time when there was a transfer of Cuban troops to the extreme south of Angola and the construction of an airfield there. The Cuban commanders came to us as they were paying a simple visit. It all ended in a friendly binge with Cuban rum and cigars. In what capacity Ochoa appeared to the Cubans – as someone checking up on them or as their commander – I never fully understood. Naturally we didn't ask why he'd come – it would have been

extremely awkward. After all, he was a great figure in the military world, known worldwide. He'd been responsible for the Cuban forces defeating the enemy at Cuito Cuanavale. We were just overjoyed that such a famous general was honouring us with his presence.

But then Gen. Ochoa, upon his return to Cuba, was condemned to death by a military tribunal in 1989 for being one of the ringleaders in the narcotics trade. He and four other Cuban generals were executed by firing squad.

Appendix 1:

Gauging the Losses and the Outcome

Cuban and FAPLA losses		SADF losses	
Tanks	94	Tanks	3
Armoured troop/combat vehicles	100	Ratel infantry fighting vehicles	5
BM-14 & BM-21 MRLs	34	Casspir armoured personnel carrier	3
D-30 & M-46 artillery pieces ³²	9	Rinkhals armoured ambulance	1
TMM mobile bridges	7	Withings armoured recovery vehicle	1
Artillery, rocket & missile systems	15	Bosbok light reconnaissance aircraft	1
Radar systems	5	Mirage F1 combat aircraft	2
23-mm anti-aircraft guns	22		
MiG-21 & MiG-23 combat aircraft	9		
Helicopters	9		

IN THE PRECEDING table the then commander of the South African Defence Force (SADF), Gen. Jannie Geldenhuys, in his memoirs, *A General's Story: From an Era of War and Peace* (1995), lists the losses as a result of the fighting between September 1987 and April 1988.

He goes on to state: "On the Cuban-FAPLA side 4785 men were killed in action. These are confirmed figures and do not include the deserters, the wounded and those who died of their wounds later. The real figure is probably a few thousand more. On the South African side 31 men were killed in action. This is the real figure. Six more of our troops died of malaria" (pp. 222–3).

All in all, I do doubt the accuracy of the numbers given in the table above of those killed and wounded. The "confirmed figures" of Geldenhuys consist of FAPLA losses counted mostly by UNITA. These UNITA figures were usually about 35 to 40 times higher than the reality. Only 4 to 15 Soviet military advisers, specialists and military interpreters took part in hostilities with every FAPLA brigade. Two of them (one colonel and one junior lieutenant) were mortally wounded in 1987–8 in or near Cuito Cuanavale. Cubans confirmed the loss of 39 military personnel. Gen. Geldenhuys did not mention how many Mirage FIII and Mirage F1 combat planes (as well as AML-60 and AML-90 APCs) were really lost. For example, Lt.-Col. Igor Zhdarkin said: "During the period of my service in the 21st FAPLA brigade, no less than four South African aircraft were shot down, as well as one reconnaissance plane and two helicopters."

I don't wish to insult Gen. Geldenhuys (who is respected not only by his compatriots but also by his former enemies), but he cites, to put it mildly, incorrect data about the losses of the South Africans, in particular the aircraft. He does not mention the heavy losses of UNITA troops (hundreds of them died every day during major battles near Cuito Cuanavale in March 1988) and the South West African Territorial Force, but only those of the SADF, a formation of only 40 men. Moreover, he intentionally or unintentionally lumps together FAPLA with the Cubans, and, furthermore, he doesn't even remember SWAPO – three armies with very big differences as concerns their levels of preparation and ability to fight. He also minimises the threat of Fidel Castro to seize the whole of

Namibia to resolve the outcome of the war. Castro held, by March 1988, overwhelming military superiority in terms of numbers and capability, both on land and in the air.

The SADF were also defeated by the Cubans in several little-known battles after Cuito Cuanavale in April–June 1988. The South Africans started to blow up bridges on the Namibian border after the Cuban offensive towards the Namibian border from Cahama in southern Angola. This offensive was backed by some 700 to 800 Cuban tanks, 40 000 military personnel and 60–70 combat planes. The South Africans had two choices – to be kicked out of Namibia by the Cubans or sign the peace agreement that would herald Namibian independence and allow themselves a face-saving disengagement. South African political and military authorities signed the accord and declared themselves the political and military winners. In reality the agreement made South African withdrawal from Angola obligatory in return for the gradual withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola. When asked how much time the Soviet or Cuban armies would have needed to expel the South Africans from southern Angola if they had been there instead of the Angolan armies and launched an attack from September 1987, Lt.-Col. Igor Zhdarkin answered, “At most six months.”

Dr Gennady Shubin

Appendix 2:

List of Major Weaponry

South African and UNITA equipment

Alouette III light utility helicopter: used for fire support during counter insurgency operations and reconnaissance and search-and-rescue missions

Buccaneer S Mk 50: low-level heavy attack aircraft carrying a weapons load of up to 7257 kg (bombs and rockets) in various configurations

C-130 B Hercules: military transport aircraft with a range of 3539 km carrying the maximum payload of 22.5 tons. It can carry 64 kitted-up paratroopers

Casspir: mine-protected armoured personnel carrier used mainly during counter-insurgency operations

Cheetah fighter bomber: modification and upgrade of the Mirage FIII for the SAAF with similar performance and dimensions to the Israeli Kfir

Eland 90: armoured reconnaissance vehicle with 90-mm gun. Local modification and adaptation of the Panhard AML-60 and AML-90 armoured vehicles

155mm gun howitzer:

G-5 155-mm towed field gun: range 39 kilometres using base-bleed ammunition

G-6 155-mm self-propelled field gun: range 39 km using base-bleed ammunition

Impala Mk II: light ground attack and support aircraft carrying two 30-

- mm cannon and up to 1814 kg bombs or rockets under wing
- Valkiri MRL: self-propelled 127-mm multiple rocket launcher carrying 24 tubes with maximum range of 22 km; sometimes mistakenly called a “Kentron”
- Land Rover 4x4 vehicle: standard and widely used all-terrain vehicle
- 106.7-mm gun (M-40): lightweight recoilless gun, with an effective range of 1350 m. Often mounted on the back of all-terrain vehicles
- M-81 gun: conventional gun firing a HEAT (high-explosive anti-tank) guided missile
- Mirage fighter aircraft:
 - Mirage F-ICZ: fighter-interceptor carrying two 30-mm cannon and various sophisticated air-to-air and air-to-ground weapons systems
 - Mirage F-1AZ: specialised ground attack craft carrying between four and eight 120-kg and 250-kg bombs
 - Mirage III and R2Z: tactical photographic reconnaissance aircraft
- Olifant tank: modernised Centurion Mk V main battle tank with 105-mm gun.
- Puma transport helicopter: also used as assault supply craft and in casualty-and-evacuation and search-and-rescue operations, lifting 3.3 tons of cargo or sixteen troops
- Racal Radio: high-frequency military backpack transceiver systems – dependable and widely used receiver/transmitters
- Ratel armoured troop carrier:
 - Ratel 20: standard armoured infantry combat vehicle with a 20-mm gun carrying a 3-man crew and 9-man infantry section
 - Ratel 81: adapted for combat support carrying a 5-man crew and a 8- mm mortar with 4.8 km maximum range on a centred turntable
 - Ratel 90: anti-tank version of the Ratel 20, with a 90-mm gun
- Many more variants were developed for specialised applications.
- Rinkhals: mine-protected armoured ambulance
- Samil group of multi-purpose vehicles:
 - Samil 20: 4x4 light, 2.2 ton pay load, multi-purpose transport vehicle
 - Samil 50: 4x4 medium, 4.8 ton pay load, multi-purpose transport vehicle

Samil 100: 6x6 heavy, 10-ton pay load, multi-purpose transport vehicle also adapted and used as gun tractor for the G-5 field gun, recovery towing trucks and many more specialised applications.

SR A-84: radio station

Soviet / Cuban / FAPLA equipment

AGS-17: automatic grenade launcher: infantry support weapon, fires 30-mm grenades carrying a high explosive fragmentation warhead with an effective range of 1700 m.

AK-47 (AK): Kalashnikov sub-machine-gun (assault rifle) (7.62 x 39 mm)

AKM: updated Kalashnikov sub-machine-gun

An-12: military cargo aircraft with a range of 5000 km carrying a maximum payload of 20.5 tons. It can carry 60 paratroopers

B-10: anti-tank lightweight recoilless gun (82 mm), with range of 4400 m. Often mounted on the back of jeeps and other all-terrain vehicles

BM-21 (Katyusha) (Grad): 40-barrel 122-mm multiple rocket launcher. Range – 20.5 km

BMP-1: amphibious infantry combat vehicle with a 73-mm smooth-bore gun and (optional) Malytka anti-tank guided missile

BRDM-2: amphibious armoured reconnaissance car

BTLB (Strela-10): anti-aircraft amphibious tracked complex

BTR-60PB: amphibious armoured personnel carrier

D-30 122-mm howitzer: field gun (range 15.5 km) with a maximum range of 21 km with rocket assisted projectiles (RAP rounds).

EE-25 (Engesa-25): 4x4 two-ton or 6x6 five-ton Brazilian all-terrain truck

EE-50 (Engesa-50): 6x6 five-ton Brazilian all-terrain truck

GAZ-24: Volga sedan car

GAZ-66: 4x4 two tons all terrain truck

Grad-P: 122 mm light portable one-shot rocket system. Range 11 km.

IFA W50: 4x4 five-tons all-terrain truck, produced in former GDR

IL-62M: long-range jet aircraft

KMTLB: command tracking station

KPV: heavy Vladimirov machine gun (14.5 x 114 mm). Standard weaponry of BTP-60PB and BRDM-2.

KrAZ-255B: 6x6 heavy (7.5 ton) all-terrain truck
Kvadrat: anti-aircraft tracked missile system
M-120: heavy 120 mm mortar
Mi-8/Mi-17: helicopter
Mi-24 (Crocodile): attack helicopter
MiG-17, MiG-21 and MiG-23ML fighter and fighter bomber
MTLB: multi-purpose light-armoured tracked towing vehicle
MTLBs4 Strela-10: anti-aircraft complexes on an MTLB tracked vehicle base
Osa-AK: wheeled anti-aircraft mobile rocket launcher
P-19: radar station
Pechora: anti-aircraft missile system
PKT: Kalashnikov tank-mounted machine gun (7.62 x 54 mm)
RPG-7V: portable anti-tank grenade launcher
RPK: light machine gun (7.62 x 39 mm)
S-2 (Strela air-defence system): anti-aircraft missile
S-75 (Dvina): anti-aircraft missile system
S-125 (Pechora): anti-aircraft missile system
Shilka (ZSU-23-4): four-barrelled 23-mm tracked anti-aircraft auto-cannon
SPG-9: heavy anti-tank grenade launcher
Strela-1, Strela-2 and Strela-2M: anti-aircraft rockets, launched manually
Strela-10: anti-aircraft missile system on MTLB
SU-22: fighter bomber
SVD: Dragunov sniper rifle (7.62 x 54 mm)
T-54, T-54B, T-55 (improved variant of T-54B) and T-62: tank
Unimog: 4x4 Brazilian version of the Mercedes truck
Ural-375 (Ural-4320): 6x6 heavy (4.5 ton) off-road truck. The Ural-375 and Ural 4320 (diesel engine) (which replaced Ural-375 in 1979 in production) provide a platform for BM-21 Grad MLR. Improved variant of Ural-4320 is still in production and very popular in the army.
ZPU-4: Vladimirov quadruple mount 14.5-mm anti-aircraft machine-gun
ZSU-23-4 (Shilka): four-barrelled 23-mm tracked anti-aircraft auto-cannon
ZU-23-2 (Zeushka): double-barrelled 23-mm anti-aircraft auto-cannon

Endnotes

- 1 Cassinga was the main camp for civilian Namibian refugees.
- 2 Other sources indicate that 624 people lost their lives.
- 3 S-125 Pechora anti-aircraft defences near Lubango, with Angolan (Cuban) military crews, shot down one SAAF Buccaneer bomber and one Mirage fighter out of a flight of five planes (two Buccaneers and three Mirages). After this action, the SAAF tried to avoid places of troop concentrations around Pechora S-125 sites.
- 4 General Vassily Shakhnovich, the chief military adviser in Angola in 1977–1980, and General Konstantin Kurochkin who succeeded him in 1982–1985, were the stuff of legend. Western political scientists and historians saw General Shakhnovich (called Shaganovich or Shahanovitch) as a famous chemical expert who conducted chemical war against UNITA and South African troops. In fact a general with these other surnames never existed, despite the nonsense written about him in some history books. The failed operation was planned by Lt.-Gen. Pavel Gusev, who replaced Kuzmenko, and the head of staff, Maj.-Gen. Ivan Ryabchenko.
- 5 Earlier, Generals Kurochkin and Kuzmenko were invited from the airborne forces.
- 6 A cadre (reduced strength) division is a unit which is up to size, or nearly, in number of officers and the hardware and armaments, but with less than 10 per cent of the junior enlisted men. When mobilisation is announced the division increases to its full size.
- 7 In the Angolan province of Cunene there was a network of early-warning radar stations that tracked the SAAF. In foreign military literature they were often mistakenly called “Soviet stations for satellite tracking of NATO ships in the South Atlantic”.
- 8 Later it was discovered that at least 20 large crocodiles lived near the bridge over the Cuito River. Fortunately none of the Soviet military

- were attacked by these reptiles.
- 9 This was not the only time. Lt.-Col. Igor Zhdarkin recalls another occasion. South African planes, flying at a low level, burnt out 29 petrol tankers on the 'road of life' between Menongue and Cuito Cuanavale. In total on the road, there were over 350 remains of burnt-out tanks, APCs, infantry combat vehicles, petrol tankers and trucks.
 - 10 "Soviet military advisers, specialists and interpreters (from 6 [4] to 15 people) served in each of the elite FAPLA brigades – 16th, 21st, [25th,] 47th, and 59th" (Sergey Kolomnin, *Russian Special Forces in Africa*, 2005, p. 227).
 - 11 Jonas Savimbi, leader of UNITA, which from 1975 to 2002 was in opposition to the legitimate government of Angola (MPLA). His organisation conducted an almost unceasing armed struggle for power in the country. Savimbi and his closest allies were killed in 2002, his movement ceased their armed struggle and is now the legal opposition in parliament.
 - 12 The SADF did cross this river on their approach to Cuito Cuanavale in 1987.
 - 13 Most houses in Cuito Cuanavale were concrete structures.
 - 14 The rocket-propelled shell from the SADF Valkiri system is stuffed with 60 kg of explosives and 8500 small metal balls, which had killing power for a distance of up to 1500 metres.
 - 15 The Cuban Brig.-Gen. Orlando Ochoa Sanchez was sentenced to death in 1989 on his return to Cuba, officially for participation in the drugs trade. He had been the hero of the war in Ethiopia (Ogaden, 1978) and then in Angola (Cuito Cuanavale, 1987–1988), when he effectively led the battle of Cuito Cuanavale although it had officially been fought by Angolans.
 - 16 In 1988 there were 55 000 Cuban servicemen in Angola, 40 000 of them in the south of the country together with 30 000 FAPLA soldiers. The Cubans concentrated up to 600 (in reality up to 800) tanks and over 1000 anti-aircraft systems there, according to Fidel Castro's speech at a rally on 2 December 2005.
 - 17 The bridge was blasted first by local spies – pro-UNITA civilians or UNITA agents – and then by South African military frogmen. It was finally demolished by a guided air-bomb.

- 18 In March 1988 the heaviest battles took place between the SADF and the Cuban and Angolan defenders near Cuito Cuanavale. The South Africans were forced to retreat because of the danger of their units being encircled by Cuban troop reinforcements that had disembarked in the ports of southern Angola prior to advancing to the Namibian border. The battle near Cuito Cuanavale could be classed as a draw, but in reality South Africa had lost.
- 19 This report, the fullest FAPLA, Cuban and Soviet information on the battle for Cuito Cuanavale, about the build-up to combat, the military action and the operations that followed immediately afterwards, may well exist in the archives of the Angolan ministry of defence under the signature of General “Vietnam”, who later became head of the Angolan general staff.
- 20 General Roberto Leal Ramos Monteiro “Ngongo” – plenipotentiary ambassador extraordinary of the Republic of Angola to the Russian Federation, 2000–2006; Angolan minister of internal affairs, 2006–2010.
- 21 BM-21 Grad multiple-launch rocket, sometimes called “Katyusha” after its Second World War BM-13 model.
- 22 The Soviet Union’s part in the Second World War is called “the Great Patriotic War” by Russians. The USSR destroyed 70 per cent of Nazi warplanes and more than 75 per cent of the ground forces and materiel of Nazi Germany and its supporters. It did so by producing 29 000 military planes and 30 000 tanks and more self-propelled guns than Nazi Germany and its allies had.
- 23 This refers to the Soviet holiday of 7 November, the anniversary of the October Revolution.
- 24 Angolan military aircraft pilots avoided flying at low altitudes, not only because of fear of their South African counterparts but also, in particular, because of poor nutrition, resulting in their not being able to endure excess G-loads during air combat. The Cuban pilots, for their part, fought well at any altitude against the South Africans.
- 25 Direction and distance were given from a coded point on the military map.

- 26 "Palych", a colloquial form of the patronymic Pavlovich. Patronymics are often used unofficially in the army instead of military rank or surnames.
- 27 Vladimir Semenovich Vysotsky (1938–1980), one of the greatest Russian poets of the twentieth century.
- 28 "Botswana's President Hurt in Jet Explosion: Johannesburg, Aug. 8 — President Quett K. Masire of Botswana suffered minor back injuries on Sunday night when one of the engines of his plane exploded at 35,000 feet while he was on the way to a meeting of southern African leaders in Angola. A statement by Mr. Masire's office today said that the plane, a British Aerospace executive jet, was about 400 miles south of Luanda when the right engine "exploded and fell off". It did not say what caused the blast. The British pilot of the plane, carrying seven passengers including two Botswana Cabinet Ministers, made an emergency landing" (*New York Times*, 9 August 1988).
- 29 These figures are incorrect. In 1988 only 700 to 800 Cuban tanks and 40 000 soldiers were in fact deployed in southern Angola. But these figures do not include FAPLA's tanks and 30 000 FAPLA soldiers in this region. And according to the memoirs of the Soviet veterans only 2000 Cuban servicemen were in Cuito Cuanavale from late 1987. On 11 and 23 March 1988 the heaviest of battles took place between the South African army and the Cuban and Angolan troops near Cuito Cuanavale. That was when the South Africans had to retreat because of the danger of being encircled by the Cuban troops, who were being reinforced through the local ports. As already mentioned, the outcome of the battle near Cuito Cuanavale might be classed a draw, but in reality South Africa lost the war.
- 30 Only commanders in the People's Liberation Army of Namibia could assign such a task.
- 31 The South African Defence Force used a few foreign nationals in some of their special forces units until the South African government became sensitive to accusations of employing mercenaries. These foreigners were given the option of applying for South African citizenship or leaving the units. Only a handful were involved: South

African reconnaissance operations normally had teams of up to six men and very rarely operated in larger groups.

- 32 Geldenhuys lumps together the old BM-14 (MRL; range 9.5 km) and the standard BM-21 (MRL; range 20.5 km). He does the same with the standard gun (D-30; range 15.5 km) and the long-range gun (M-46; range 27.5 km). None of these weapons could equal the South African G-5 and the G-6 (range 39 to 47 km).

BUSH THE ROAD TO CUITO CUANAVALÉ WAR

For almost fifteen years South Africa was involved in a civil war in Angola, the so-called Bush War, on behalf of the UNITA faction. The climax of this protracted conflict was the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale, the largest military engagement on African soil since the Second World War. Here South African forces came to blows with Angolan FAPLA troops and their Cuban allies in a battle whose outcome is still hotly debated.

Thousands of South African conscripts took part in the Bush War and their stories are beginning to be told. What is much less known is the view from the other side. This book provides, for the first time in English, first-hand, personal accounts of the conflict, leading up to Cuito Cuanavale, as told by Soviet advisers to the Angolan army. Their experience of the war and their views and assessment of their South African enemies as well as their Cuban and Angolan allies will surprise and fascinate South African readers and at the same time offer new insights into the conflict.

Dr Gennady Shubin is a Senior Research Fellow at the Africa Institute in Moscow.

Dr Andrei Tokarev is head of the Centre for South African Studies at the Africa Institute in Moscow and an Associate Professor at the Military University in Moscow.



ISBN 978-1-4314-0185-7

www.jacana.co.za